

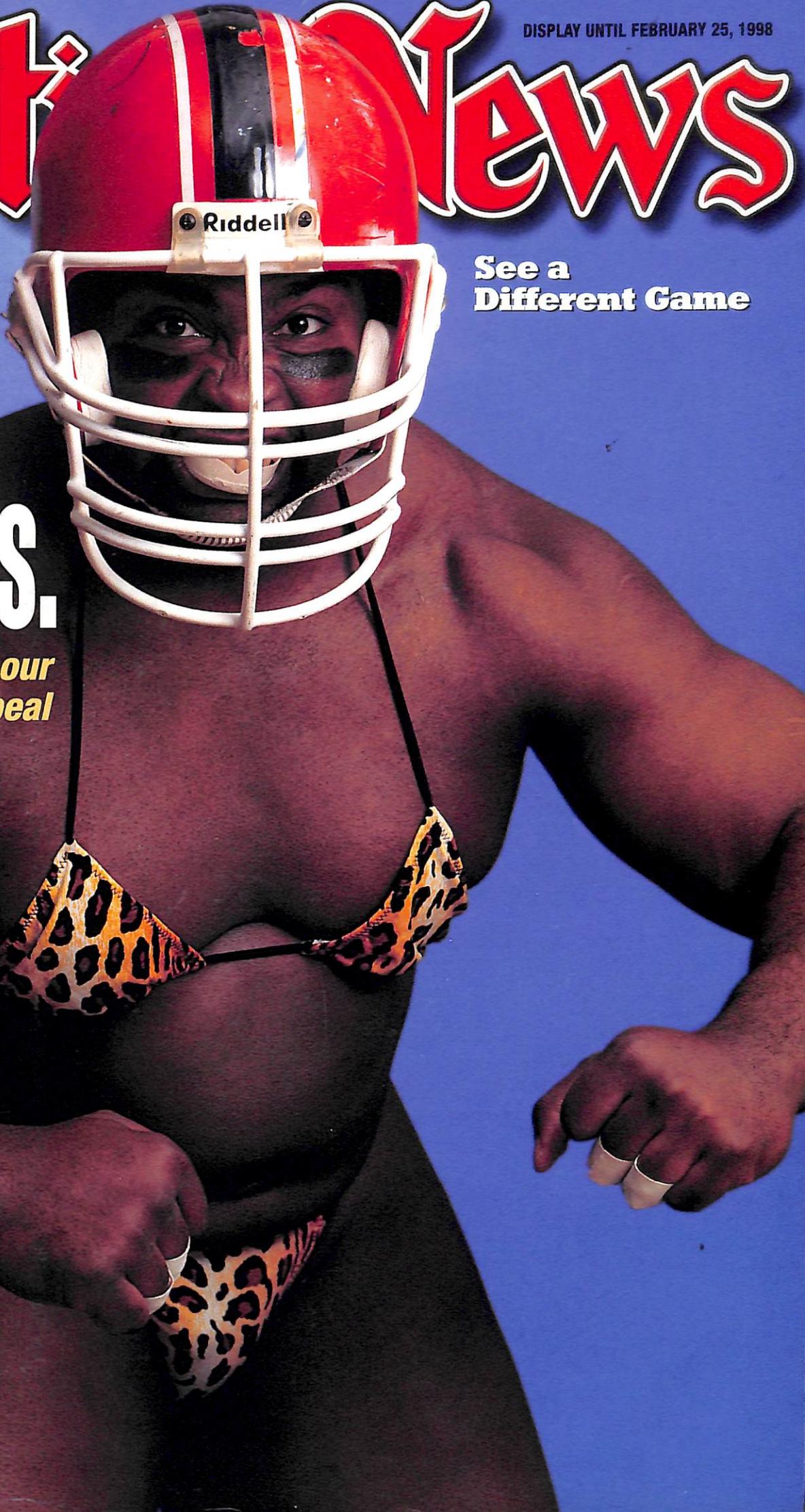
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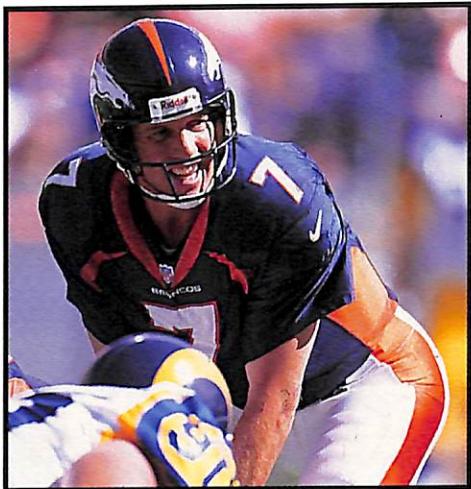
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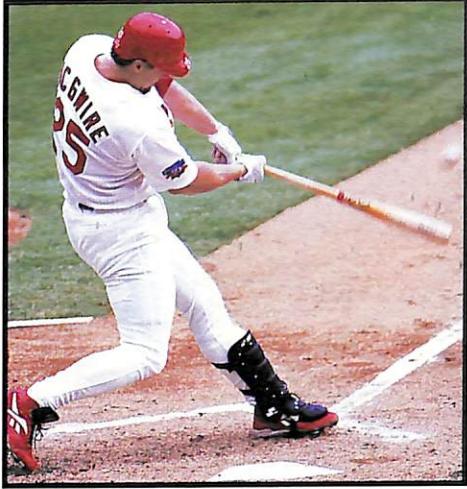
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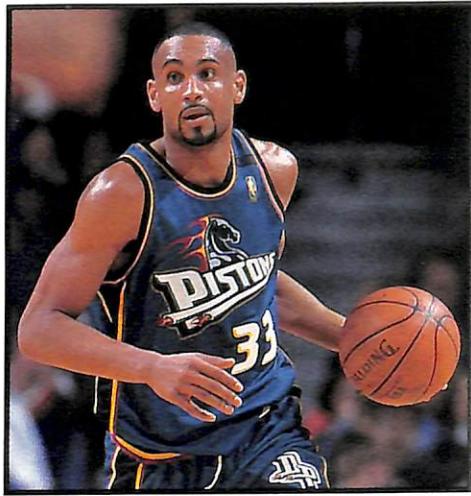
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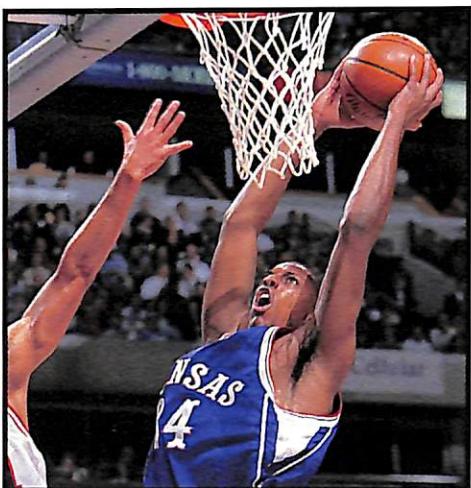
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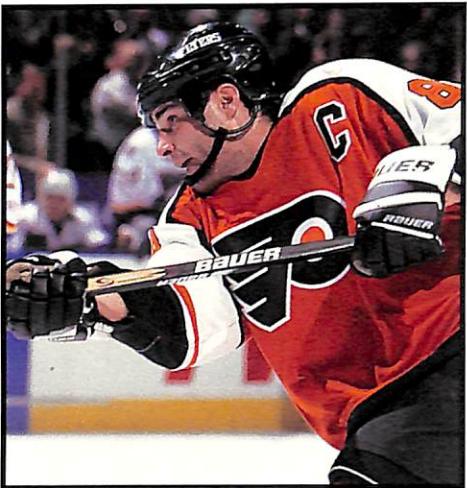
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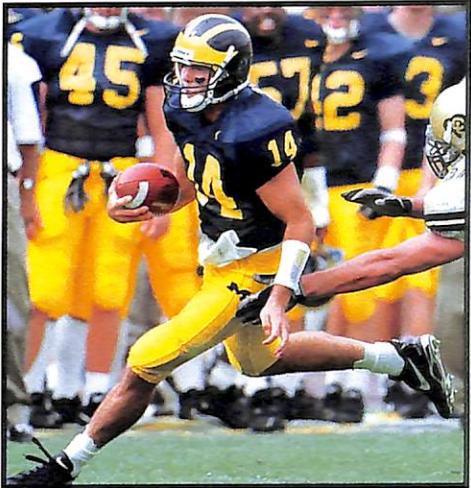
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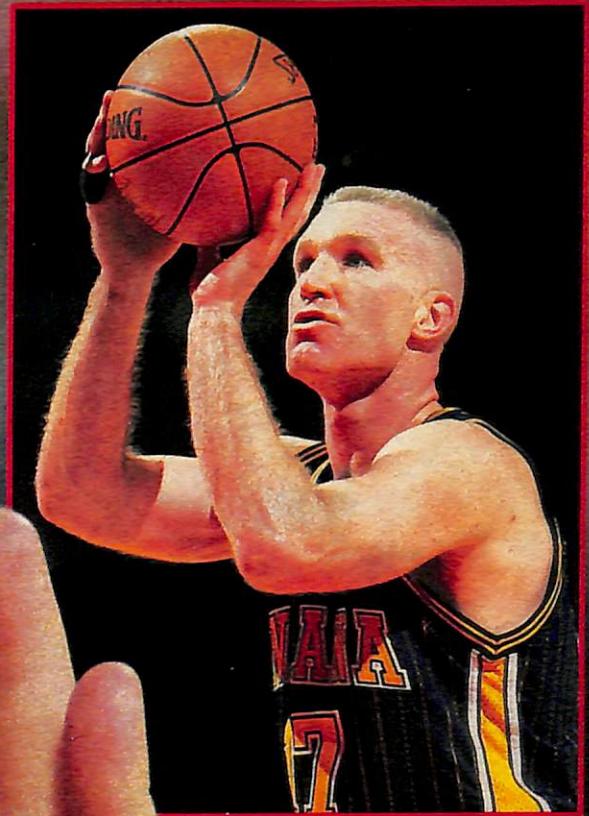
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MO VAUGHN's make-or-break season

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Indiana's
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7 REASONS LARRY BIRD HAS THE PACERS FLYING

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See a Different Game

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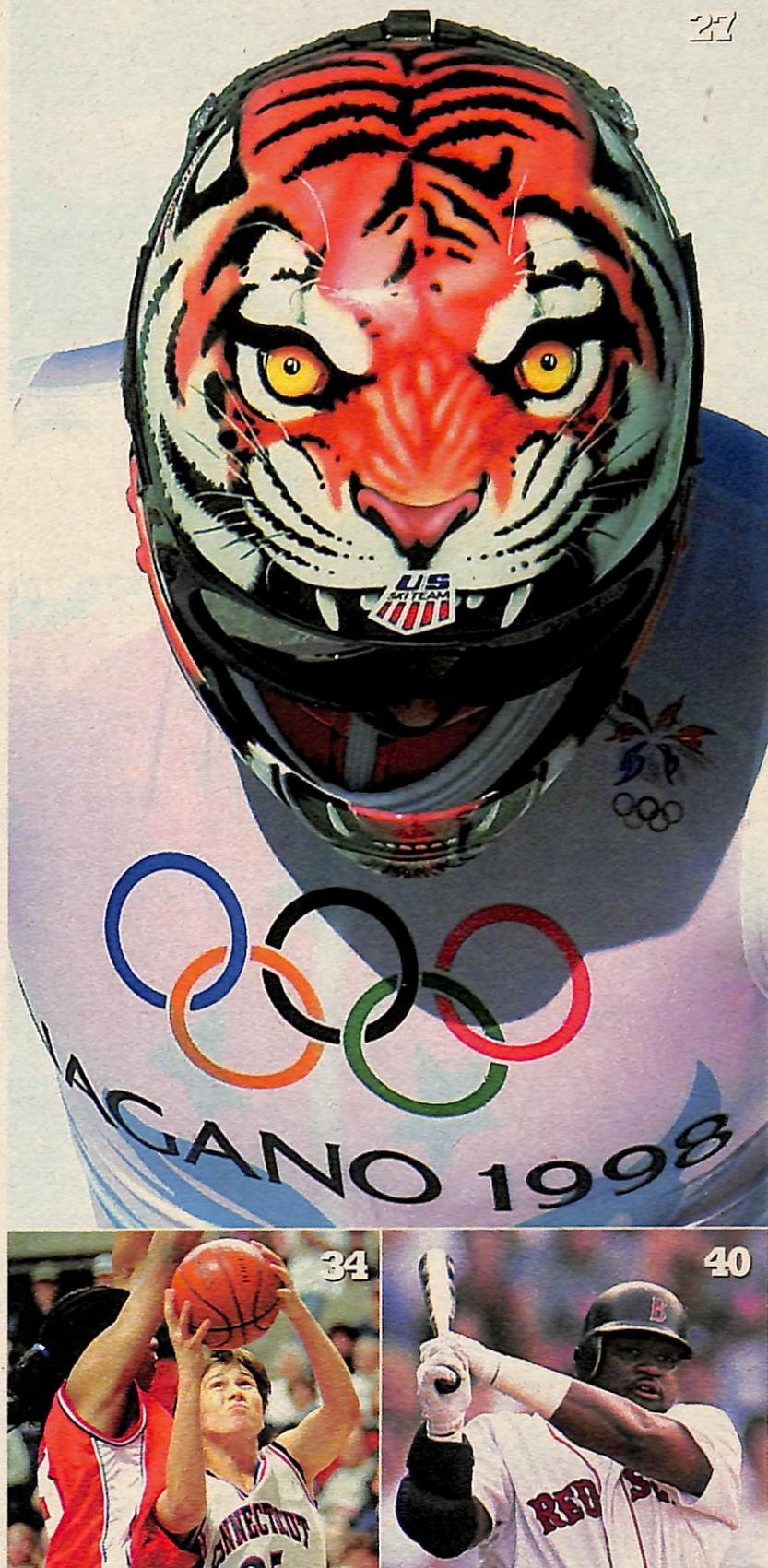
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Why TSN is different from other sports publications (especially those with swimsuit models).

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From the Editor

See a different swimsuit

When THE SPORTING NEWS unveiled its new redesign, a few readers jumped to a quick conclusion. "What's next?" they wrote, "a swimsuit issue?"

Those were the people who equated a more colorful, accessible appearance with content that is somehow superficial and trivial. I hope you've seen in the dozen issues since our relaunch that a magazine can deliver superior information in a dynamic way.

But now the truth must be told. As you can see from the facing page, we did decide to do a swimsuit issue. It tells you everything you need to know to understand what we deliver versus what our competitors deliver.

THE SPORTING NEWS is the only major sports publication that does not consider swimsuit coverage a key element of its editorial package. Other magazines that spend most of their time covering sports will fall into their annual spring habit of trying to win readers over with gorgeous women in skimpy clothes.

Even the newest sports magazine, which is not even on the market yet, is promoting itself with the line "all nudes, tastefully done."

All this goes to point out the real difference between THE SPORTING NEWS and everyone else in the field. We make you a promise and we deliver on it: We cover the Big 6 sports every week of the year, in

season and out. No one else does that.

We promise a consistent diet of inside information, team reports and statistics. Every story is held up to a simple standard: Tell readers something they don't already know.

So, this is the only swimsuit shot you'll get from us this week—or any week. We hope you'll get a little chuckle from it and that it will remind you of the difference between TSN and all the rest.

E-mail John Rawlings at jrawlings@sportingnews.com

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A full-page photograph of a woman from the waist up. She is wearing a red and white striped football helmet with a white facemask. She is also wearing a bikini with a black and yellow leopard print pattern. She is standing with her legs slightly apart and her hands on her hips, looking directly at the camera. The background is a solid dark grey.

WE THOUGHT ABOUT A SWIMSUIT ISSUE, BUT IT JUST DIDN'T SEEM TO FIT.

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COLLEGE & ARMY ROTC

Building Successful Futures

THE SPORTING NEWS and the Army ROTC salute today's top college performers who are leaders in sports and in the ROTC program. Congratulations to the student athletes in this week's issue.



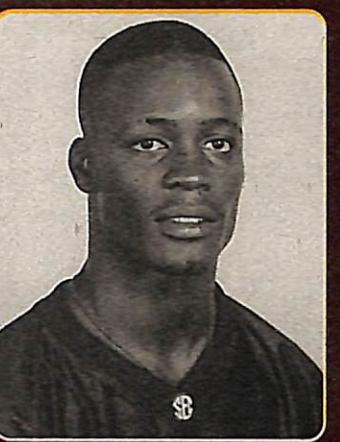
Tal Wilkins

Tal Wilkins earned All-America honors in 1997 for West Virginia University's NCAA championship rifle team. The ROTC cadet is a finance major and a member of the Athletic Director's Academic Honor Roll for student athletes. He was a first-team selection in smallbore shooting and second-team honoree in air rifle for the Mountaineers, who have won nine of the past 10 NCAA championships, including all three years that Wilkins has competed. The Union, S.C., native was a 28th-place finisher in smallbore at the 1996 U.S. Olympic Trials. He worked as a volunteer at the Olympics and also ran in the torch relay. The Mountaineer senior now has set his sights on competing in the 2000 Olympics.

Theresa DeSitter attends the University of Michigan on an Army ROTC Scholarship. The freshman diver from Aurora, Ill., is enrolled in the School of Nursing and hopes to continue her scholastic achievements that she attained in high school as a member of the honor roll. DeSitter has a bright athletic future ahead of her as a member of the Wolverines' swim team. She placed 14th in the Illinois state competition and set several high school records as a two-time sectional and conference champion.



Theresa DeSitter



Sheldon Morris

Sheldon Morris is an Army ROTC scholarship recipient at the University of Mississippi. He is a graduate of Paxon High School (Jacksonville, FL), where he played three sports (football, track, soccer) and still maintained his academic responsibilities by being honored with an Army Scholar award and the "Turn Around Student" award. On the football field, Morris played in all 12 games this past season for the Ole Miss Rebels, including the Motor City Bowl victory over Marshall. The sophomore wide receiver was rated as the squad's outstanding special teams player of the year after returning five kickoffs for 84 yards and recording nine tackles on kick return units during the regular season.



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Voice of the Fan

Choice Voice I really have to commend Dave Kindred on "One man, standing tall," concerning Casey Martin (TSN, February 9). I find it hard to believe pro golfers are against his using a cart. Let's see them get rid of their caddies and start carrying their bags. Let's see if they are the real athletes they claim to be.

—Ralph Armstrong
Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

No shoes, no service

With all due respect to Ted Williams, whom I admire greatly, I totally disagree with his attempt to get Joe Jackson into the Hall of Fame (TSN, February 2). As a lifelong baseball and White Sox fan, I think Jackson's admission is inappropriate. I realize he has a cute nickname, "Shoeless," and recently he has been portrayed in movies such as *Field of Dreams* as a heartwarming, sympathetic character that we should pity. But, what he did was totally wrong.

I don't care how high of an average he had in the 1919 World Series. The day after he took his bribe, he allowed a fly ball to fall in front of him, resulting in a big inning for the Reds and a victory. Jackson's actions, along with his cohorts', destroyed a great White Sox team. The organization went into a nose dive that spanned three decades. Jackson did a reprehensible thing, and he knew what he was doing. No way does he belong in the Hall of Fame.

John Putnam
Moravia, N.Y.

Martin metaphor

I thought I'd give a different perspective on the Casey Martin issue with the PGA (TSN, February 9).

Bernie Stark
LaGrange, Ill.

Bring John back?

Where does Bill Plaschke (TSN, February 9) get off saying John Elway shouldn't play next year? Of course, Elway didn't have big numbers. They didn't pass as much



PETER NEWCOMB FOR TSN

HERE'S THE HOOK: Fans say this kind of play prevents hockey and its stars from making the best game possible.

Obstruction zone

In the February 16 issue of THE SPORTING NEWS, hockey insider Larry Wigge reported on the effects that the plague of obstructions is having on hockey. Fans believe the problem is significant.

"The stars of the NHL are constantly being hooked, grabbed, clutched and slashed. In any other occupation these actions would be considered unsafe working conditions," wrote Julie Nusser of Pittsburgh. "The players should strike until the league takes steps, such as enforcing the existing rules, so the stars don't lose

Flyers had two goals denied because of goalie interference and another because of an in-the-crease violation. Yet hooking, grabbing and interference violations were regularly ignored. How can a professional sports hierarchy become so blind to the fact that it is killing the momentum of a great sport by enforcing only half of the rules? Hockey is about to stoop to the level of baseball on my 'favorite sports' list. That would put it somewhere between splinter removal and tetherball."

Ouch! And you thought getting slashed hurt.

because the running game was going so well. He came up big when he needed to and provided leadership that some of the "great" quarterbacks of our time don't provide.

Elway had a great '97 and showed in the Super Bowl that his name belongs in the same breath as Joe Montana, Johnny Unitas and Terry Bradshaw. He is a terrific role model—and does great work in the community. We need guys like him, not only in the NFL, but in all sports.

Anthony Crisomia
Philadelphia

I agree with Bill Plaschke. Returning for the 1998 season is a huge mistake for John Elway. Better to go out on top than to be recalled as the quarterback who stayed one year too long.

Steve Metsch
LaGrange, Ill.

True believer

I think the Cubs are the team of the future (TSN, February 16). They have great talent in the minors and majors. They have a pitching prospect, Kerry Wood, whom many scouts believe may be better than Roger Clemens.

I wouldn't be surprised if the Cubs break their World Series futility in the next three years.

Carl Hafer
Englewood, Ohio

Pat's finer points

"Patty Cake" (TSN, February 2), about Pat LaFontaine getting his 1,000th point, was

pleasing to read. To be the third American-born player to get 1,000 points is astonishing.

LaFontaine was told he was too small to play in the NHL, but he became very successful. His career can be described as an inspirational tale of one that beat the odds.

Nicholas Wurtz
Dallas

Upon further review ...

Paul Henderson's winning goal for Canada in the 1973 Summit Series was in the eighth game of the series. The information was incorrect in the February 9, 1998, issue.

Got a comment? THE SPORTING NEWS would love to hear from you. Write *Voice of the Fan*, 10176 Corporate Square Drive, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63132, fax your message to us at 314-997-0765, or send us electronic mail at fans@sportingnews.com. Be sure to include your name and city with your e-mail. THE SPORTING NEWS reserves the right to edit letters for brevity and content.

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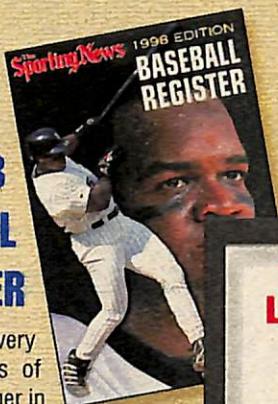
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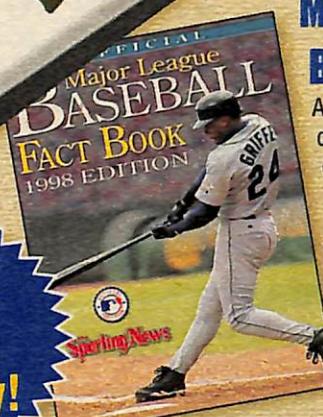
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TSN insights

Who's running this show?

Caught on the FLY

Hey, didn't you used to be the only coach the Cowboys ever had?

■ The Spies say **Denise DeBartolo York**'s meeting last week with Forty-whiners suits was an **Al Haig**. Proof **Eddie**'s sis is in charge here? The salcap creativity's gone now that \$10 mil's been dropped on restructuring **Steve Young** and **Garrison Hearst** ... because she's runnin' a bidness. Bottom line: Re-uppin' **Dana Stubblefield**-n-**Bill Floyd** just ... got ... a lot ... harder. And about that annual free-agency push? Forgetaboutit.

■ Fly's dream matchup if/when this ACC-Big Ten Basketball Challenge comes to pass in December '99: Indiana vs.

Georgia Tech. ("Hey, did **Jason Collier** wink at **Coach Knight** after throwin' one down on **Luke Recker**?")

■ Fly's Top 5 or "Note That at No Point Does UM A.D. **Tom Goss** Refer to This a-Maize-in' Cast-o-Coaching Candidates as 'The Fab 5': 1. **Tommy Amaker**; 2. **Mike Jarvis**; 3. **Pete Gillen**; 4. **Phil Ford**; 5. **Matt Doherty**.

■ Yeah, yeah, **Patrick Roy** offers top 'tending for Team Maple Leaf, but the Spies say **Marc Crawford** ain't willing to rake in an added benefit from handin' the No. 1 job to Roy instead of **Marty Brodeur**. Crawford'll need a happy goalie when the NHL season resumes if the Avs're gonna make a run at the Cup.

■ The day after 'Dorf on NBA asks everyone to focus on this season-n-this season only, **Da Pip** pops off for first time in three months about not playin' past this campaign in Chitown? Only person happy Scottie's on his way out is



ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH SEIDEL FOR TSN

LEAVIN' ON A JETS PLAN: O'Donnell's future in New York crashed and burned when he got into it with his coach.

Toni Kukoc (at least Fly takes that whinin' about sixth-man status as happiness).

■ **Buzz is Freddie** Claire's puttin' sssqueeze on the Vero Beach boys, sayin' it's time to try a new concept ... like

winnin' a postseason game. Fly's Fearless Forecast: The No. 5 starter spot'll get filled OK, but the closer and bats off the bench (righthanders hit a buck-88 in the pinch last year) will be season-long Dodger blues.

■ Fly hears Colorado State gave up home-field advantage faster than you can say, "7-23-1 vs. CU in Fort Collins" to play Buffs in Denver in September. Why? Mile High seats 45,000 more fannies than CSU's home stade.

■ **B2**'s been sayin' since mid-'96 the SF Giants need fellow Pittsburgh escapee **Bobby Bo** for his pop. If full squads report Friday, then it must be time for Barry to start whisperin' in Fly's ear again. Pssst, he's afraid he's gonna get caught lookin' at another 140-plus-walk season.

■ Finally, the Spies say the Jest redesign is long on darker green and short on **Neil O'Donnell**, especially after a season-ending shoutfest with **Tuna**. Yo, Neil, a little hiss-toe-ree lesson: Screamin' at the coach didn't work for **Boy George** in Notlanta—and yer not exactly Boy George (not that there's anything wrong with that); that cap-n-clipboard shoulda been first clue.

The Starting Five

What the sports world is talking about this week

1 Casey Martin wins his case. The PGA will appeal the ruling, citing the sanctity of competition and walking 18. Talk about a bad lie.

2 Olympic hockey's gold-medal game. Do you believe in insomnia? Yes!

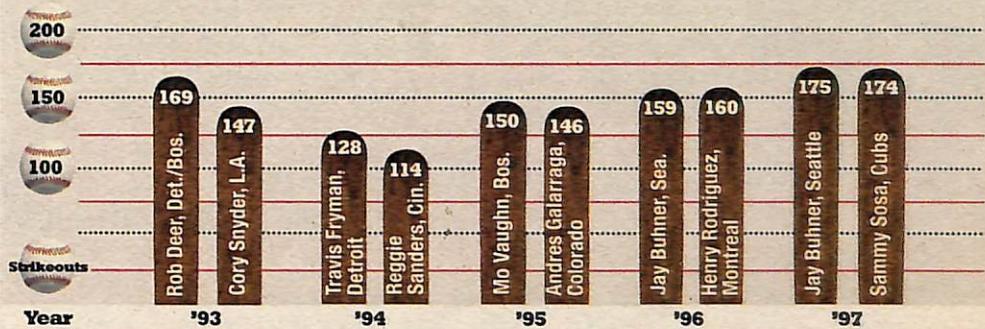
3 The NBA trading deadline. The New York Times reports that 70 percent of the league's players have been mentioned in a deal for a Canadian snowboarder to be named later.

4 Cowboys coach Chan Gailey. First one to five interviews wins.

5 U.S. 1, Brazil 0. Let's see, do we talk trash in Portuguese or Spanish?

sportTSNnumbers WHIFF MONSTERS

Someone in the Cubs' hierarchy decided it would be a great idea to team **Henry Rodriguez** with **Sammy Sosa**. Now the team has two players who excel at missing the ball—Sosa (174 in '97) and Rodriguez (160 in '96) both have led the N.L. in strikeouts. The Cubs are attempting to right the situation by inserting **Mark Grace**, a contact hitter, between the two whiff monsters in the batting order. Here's a look at the strikeout leaders since the 1993 expansion season:



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Our view of the week

Vote early

This is a fragile prosperity the NBA enjoys. TV ratings and revenues are up, but so are ticket prices. Michael Jordan is the All-Star MVP, but retirement beckons. Profits are down, attendance is soft. But Kobe Bryant has captured the young demographic's imagination.

Against this backdrop, David Stern seeks to redo the league's collective-bargaining agreement, even if it means locking out the players next season. A bloc of owners is against reopening labor talks and risking not only huge money, but also the NBA's distinction of never having lost a game to a job action.

When owners vote in April on whether to reopen talks, a simple majority—15 of 29 teams—would suffice. But league officials say privately they need more like two-thirds, since unity would be all-important in a shooting war with a union that has a lot at stake, too.

"They have a lot of big decisions coming soon," veteran NBA observer Mark Heisler of the *Los Angeles Times* writes. "That's what happens when you get big. Marketing is easy. It's success that's hard."

Go Fish

When pitchers and catchers reported last week, there was Marlins manager Jim Leyland, a World Series winner, talking about his team's chances in 1998.

"Our everyday team will be OK," he said. "It's a matter of pitching—how many outs we can get and how quickly."

Here is where the Marlins' chances lie as position players report this weekend: 13 players from the Series team remain, and two—veteran reserves Jim Eisenreich and John Cangelosi—probably will be traded in the spring.

Given a more realistic world view, the words "slim" and "none" would've come up in Leyland's talk.



My turn/Ann Killion

High and mighty

The controversy surrounding Canadian snowboarder Ross Rebagliati sparks some bigger issues the IOC will have to deal with

One of the enduring images of the first week of the Winter Olympics was of snowboarders answering questions about marijuana while Jimi Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower" blasted in the background.

Welcome to the Gen-X Olympics, where pierced navels, smoking pot and Marilyn Manson have become part of the scenery. MTV has a regular outpost, certain Olympians seem to be trying to outdo Dennis Rodman and the irony is all this rebellion is happening in Japan, the land of great conformity.

Snowboarding was one of the sports admitted to these Winter Games in an attempt to bring in a younger audience. No one's sure if it's doing that—judging by CBS' early ratings viewers were staying away no matter what their age or Oasis-tolerance level, driven insane by not being allowed to watch anything live, even live events.

But snowboarding did spark (yes, pun intended) immediate controversy.

When Canadian snowboarder Ross Rebagliati had his slalom gold medal—one of the first medals of the Games—stripped last week after he tested positive for marijuana, it seemed like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

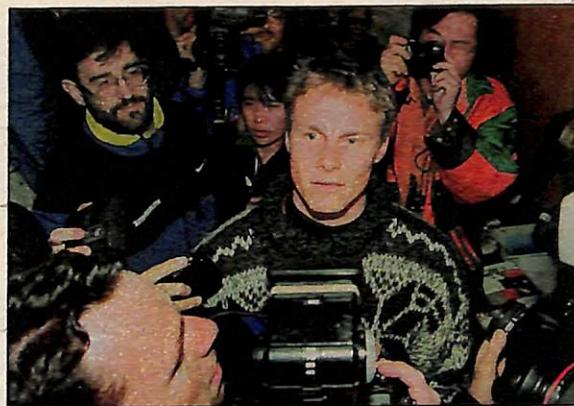
The snowboarders had come to Japan with a rebel image, unsure they wanted to be part of any club that would invite them to be members in the first place.

"They were the ones who wanted snowboarding in the Olympics, and they know snowboarding is a little more liberal," Swiss snowboarder Anita Schwaller says. "They wanted us. It's not the riders who want to be here."

But once all the "O Cannabis" jokes and "The Olympic motto: faster, stronger, and way, way higher," punch lines were used up, the Rebagliati controversy spawned legitimate debate on bigger issues, such as:

- Should the International Olympic Committee be testing its athletes for recreational drugs such as marijuana? Or should the IOC stick to worrying about sports, like who's cheating with performance-enhancing drugs?
- Do Olympic athletes have a moral responsibility, beyond their duty to perform for their country? Is being a role model part of the Olympic contract?

One day after the IOC narrowly voted to strip Rebagliati of his medal, the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled he could keep it. And the decision illuminated the confusion among the Lords of the Rings on the issue of marijuana.



FRANK GUNN / AP



A RIGHTEOUS DUDE:
Rebagliati showed character in his gold-medal winning performance and in being true to himself and his friends in the face of intense pressure.

SHAWN BOTTERILL / ALLSPORT

Some sports' governing bodies list marijuana as a banned substance. Some do not. Few experts consider marijuana performance-enhancing and therefore few officials are of the opinion that it would be cheating to use marijuana. So basically, testing for it is just snooping.

The Canadian Olympic Association, which had the embarrassment of the Ben Johnson scandal almost 10 years ago in Seoul, quickly came to Rebagliati's defense, supporting his assertion he tested positive because he had been around pot smokers at parties.

Rebagliati said: "This has nothing to do with trying to gain any advantage on anybody."

Rebagliati's Olympics have been a roller-coaster ride. He spent a day being questioned by the Japanese police. The pot accusations were taken seriously in a country where the penalty for possession can be five years imprisonment.

"When I won the medal it was the best moment of my life," Rebagliati says. "When I got the news about the test, it was the worst moment of my life."

But he offered no apologies, and he didn't muster any false shame. He freely admitted that until April of 1997 he used marijuana on occasion.

"It didn't rule my life," he says. "It was a social activity."

And he refused to publicly disown his friends in Whistler, British Columbia, which might experience a boom in tourism in the coming months because of the scandal.

"That's where it's present," says halfpipe rider Michael Michalchuck, one of Rebagliati's teammates. "You don't have the choice whether to ingest it in your system."

Watch out, Fort Lauderdale. Whistler could become the spring break destination of choice.

"I'm not going to change my friends," Rebagliati says. "People have to make decisions in their lives. They have to choose the things that they do carefully and realize the consequences. ... I'm not out to rule anybody's life."

Interesting that a 26-year-old snowboarding dude seems to have more perspective on that issue than the IOC.

Turns out the Gen-Xers have brought more than just a new look to the Games. They've brought a refreshing viewpoint.

TSN

Ann Killion is a columnist for the San Jose Mercury News and writes a monthly column for THE SPORTING NEWS.

Sound bite 'I hope five to 10 years from now, if I'm still able to play golf, the PGA will lean back and scratch their heads and say, "Why did we fight this guy?"'

—Casey Martin

Heart strings

Being a sports fan means putting your heart on the line. The Cubs as World Series contenders this year? Maybe, but any Cubs fan worth his Ivy knows you can give your heart to them any given season only to have it broken in April, October or somewhere in between.

In a month filled with hearts, TSN's website asked fans for their biggest heartbreakers. The top five:

1. Bill Buckner's World Series meltdown, Game 6, 1986. The curse of the Bambino lives on.

A two-run lead in the bottom of the 10th, no one on, two strikes to Gary Carter. Why even at that moment did I bother to have the slightest faith?

Colin Montague
Mystic, Conn.

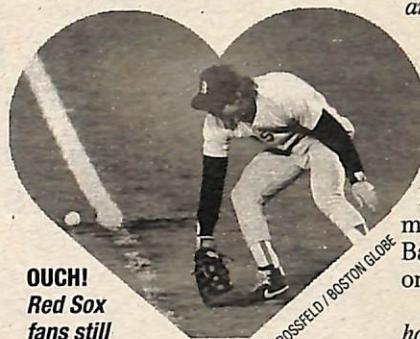
2. Super Bowl XXV, 1991. Buffalo's first and best chance at Super Bowl victory sailed wide with Scott Norwood's 47-yard field-goal attempt.

When Norwood's kick went wide, my wife and I found ourselves standing in

front of the TV, dumbstruck. ... I videotaped the game, and I still can't bring myself to watch it.

Steve Heyman
Austin, Texas

3. The Drive, January 11, 1987. In the AFC title



OUCH!
Red Sox fans still can't relive Buckner's blunder without cringing.

STAN GROSSFELD/BOSTON GLOBE

game, John Elway and the Broncos moved the ball 98 yards in the final minute to tie the Browns, then won the game in OT.

I was at that game in Cleveland Stadium and all 80,000 of us were sure the Browns had finally made it to the Super Bowl. That's why I was rooting for the Packers in this past Super Bowl. I will acknowledge John Elway's talent, but I still will not forgive him!

Kevin A. Deininger
Tokyo

4. Kirk Gibson's home run, Game 1, 1988 World Series. Gibson was a natural as a hero with his bottom-of-the-ninth, game-winning homer.

For a Giants fan, there is nothing more painful than seeing Dodgers heroics play out as a tale of American grit and determination, and then to have to watch the video clip replayed every fall.

Todd Stein
Washington, D.C.

5. A thief in the night.

Bob Irsay made his midnight move from Baltimore to Indianapolis on March 28, 1984.

I was 12 years old and had stayed home from school because I was feeling under the weather. When I heard on TV the words, "The Colts ... are moving to Indianapolis." ... I started to cry while picking up the phone to tell my dad. When I realized we wouldn't be going to any more games, I will never forget the feeling of emptiness I had. My dad hasn't really watched football since.

Mark Bushman
Fredericksburg, Va.

To read more heart-breaking moments or to send in your own, go to www.sportingnews.com or to AOL, keyword: TSN.

Q&A

Didn't Bobby Hull have a brother named Dennis who played in the NHL? For what teams did he play?

Artis Owens
Ozark, Ala.

Yes, the Hull bloodlines run deep. Not only does the Golden Jet have a son who plays in the NHL, he had a brother, too. Dennis Hull played left wing for the Blackhawks and Red Wings from 1964 through 1978. His career goal total of 303 is eclipsed by his brother (610) and his nephew Brett (547 and counting).

Got a question? Write Q&A, c/o THE SPORTING NEWS, 10176 Corporate Square Drive, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63132 or via e-mail to Q&A at tsnmail@aol.com. Because of the volume of questions, we cannot answer them all.



Rating:

Ratings are based on a scale of 1-4.

HOT BOX

Unlike NBA players at the Summer Games, NHL players are seeking to experience fully the Winter Games—so fully, in fact, they're staying in the Olympic Village in Nagano rather than in the posh quarters usually favored by pro athletes. That set us wondering ... if MTV's **Kennedy** can do interviews on CBS' Nagano broadcasts, why not put **Wayne Gretzky**, **Eric Lindros** and the gang in *The Real World*? Just imagine the adventures the guys could have as they explore the Olympic world of hockey. "Hey, hoser, who used the last of the shampoo—and I don't mean **Esben Knutsen**?" And picture the moment they master "Goh-ru! Tokuten!" (That's "He shoots! He scores!" in Japanese.) If that flies, stay tuned for **Pauly Shore**, reporting live from the biathlon competition.

NO TONY AWARDS: **Tony Danza** was a Golden Gloves boxer before he became an actor, but enough with the lame sports scripts already. As if the movie *Angels in the Outfield* weren't bad enough, NBC gave us *The Tony Danza Show*, a ratings black hole in which Danza showed he couldn't hold **Dabney Coleman**'s laptop when it came to playing a sportswriter. This week, Danza managed to three-peat with the TV movie, *The Garbage-Picking, Field Goal-Kicking Philadelphia Phenomenon*, which made the Pro Bowl seem entertaining by comparison. We'll concede the plot's premise—we saw the Eagles' special teams last season—but this heartwarming story of a garbage man who gets his big break and becomes the Eagles' kicker was more like the **Scott Norwood** story. In reverse. It's time Tony took off the gloves.

BOOK CLUB: *A March to Madness: The View from the Floor in the Atlantic Coast Conference* (By John Feinstein. 456 pp. Little, Brown. \$24.95). Test your endurance and your love for ACC basketball with Feinstein's latest journey into comprehensiveness, a complete, no, make that really complete, journey through the '96-'97 season in which Duke won the regular-season title, and North Carolina won the ACC Tournament and reached the Final Four, only to lose the semi to Arizona. This is a coach's book. The tales it tells are mostly from their viewpoint. Seven of the league's nine coaches gave Feinstein complete access, including entry to practices, meetings and locker rooms. This tour de force is full of anecdotes, loaded with background info and fun to read. But you better be mad about ACC hoops before you pick it up.

Rating:

—Steve Gietschier

(See www.sportingnews.com/voices/steve-gietschier/)

DO THE RIGHT THING: Former Bears defensive lineman **Chris Zorich** recently took 100 juniors and seniors from Chicago Vocational, his alma mater, to see a film that moved him deeply. "I saw *Amistad* the day it came out," says Zorich. "As the weeks went by, I was shocked when a lot of my friends hadn't seen it yet. I thought, 'I bet there are a lot of students who haven't seen it either. What can I do about it?'



MICHAEL S. GREEN/AP

Seeing a movie like *Amistad* is an entertaining way to learn about an important historical event. At times the movie is draining emotionally and difficult to watch, but it's the most realistic movie on slavery that I've ever seen."



REEL DEALS: Zorich and Steven Spielberg's film.

Seven degrees

He coaches like a man waiting for a doctor's appointment. He leans forward and places his chin on his palm. Then he leans back and clasps his hands around a knee. Every now and then he gets up, stuffs his hands in his pockets and walks back and forth.

Excuse us, Mr. Bird, can we get you a magazine?

Watch Larry Bird and his casual manner on the sideline and you may come away with the impression that coaching in the NBA is simple. "It looks easy," he admits. No wonder retired players such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Robert Parish are talking about following Bird's flight back into the game as head coaches. Hey, no point groveling around as an assistant when the top job is such a breeze.

But here's the word from Bird: "It's a lot of hard work."

Take a closer look at all the buttons Bird is pushing—and not pushing—and you'll see it's no accident the Pacers last week had the best record in the East (35-13), or that the Pacers have been the league's most consistent team—since their 2-5 start, they have lost two games in a row only once. Granted, they lack killer instinct at times—which could prove costly in the playoffs—but they also have enough pride to avoid being killed (only two of their 13 losses have been by double-figure margins).

Bird isn't a student of management technique, and he hasn't read the books on success co-written by his peers, Rick Pitino and Pat Riley. But he has put on a clinic of organizational leadership by coaching much the same way he played: with fundamentals, instinct and, oh yes, effort.

If he did write a book, it might include the following principles—we'll call them the seven habits of a highly effective coach.

1 Keep your staff small—and delegate

Bird was on the distant perimeter of the league during the five years following his retirement in 1992, and before he took the Pacers job he had never coached a game on any level. He knew he needed experienced and proven assistant coaches, and he got them in Dick Harter and Rick Carlisle, who had worked together the previous three seasons on P.J. Carlesimo's staff in Portland.

Just as important, Bird hired nobody else, other than video coordinator Dan Burke. He knew from his playing experience that many assistant coaches around the league were under-employed clipboard toters who didn't have much of a purpose. Rather than having three or four assistants doing a little, Bird wanted two doing a lot.

Harter runs the defense and Carlisle the offense. Bird, free of insecurities about his authority, is the overseer.

"I got lucky," Bird says of his staff. "I got very lucky."

Harter has taken a team that, on the whole, lacks speed, and turned it into one of the league's best defensive units. The Pacers don't gamble much, but they stop teams by emphasizing positioning and help.

Carlisle, who diagrams all plays during timeouts, is at the forefront of an attack that features ball movement and balance. Indiana has one of the league's best playmakers in Mark Jackson, one of its better post-up scorers in Rik Smits and two of its best 3-point threats in Reggie Miller and Chris Mullin. The offense incorporates all of them.

2 Make 'em sweat

Bird's legendary playing career was the result of a legendary work ethic. All you need to know is that when teammate Quinn Buckner called his house the morning after the Celtics won the title in 1984, Bird was out running. In his mind, it was time to begin preparing for the following season.

Bird brings the same ethic to coaching. He insists his players be on time—just ask Travis Best and Dale Davis, who were left on the runway when they were a couple of minutes late for a preseason flight—and he runs them hard. The Pacers, by the players' estimation, run as much or more than any team in the league during practice.

Bird, who cites former Celtics coach Bill Fitch as a role model in this regard, constantly harps on effort, pointing out that most players are on the floor for fewer than 30 minutes each game. "Now come on," Bird says. "If you can't bust it for 20 minutes, you should find a different profession."

By following this list of principles, Larry Bird—who incorporates in his coaching a little Bill Fitch, a little K.C. Jones and a lot of preparation—has enabled the Pacers to become one of the league's elite teams

By Mark Montieth



Off speculation

NBA

Bird also keeps his team mindful of the basics. He insists his players make 50 foul shots after most practices. As a result, the Pacers' percentage from the line has improved from .722 last season to .761 this season. Funny how that works.

3 Keep it loose

His intensity aside, Bird isn't a member of the coaching legion of nervous screamers. The atmosphere around the team is loose. He's happy as long as the players are working hard, and he's unafraid to show it. He cracks jokes, takes players aside for brief pep talks, rebounds for them while they shoot and even engages media relations director David Benner in a post-practice game of one-on-one on occasion. His players tend to linger on the floor and in the locker room after prac-

tice, as if there's nowhere else they'd rather be. The approach carries over into the games. Since their 2-5 start, the Pacers usually have performed well in last-minute situations. "If I'm ranting and raving and stomping around, they notice that, and it would hurt them," Bird says. "I want to show them I have a lot of confidence in them. I think we've won a lot of games that way. They sense that I'm calm, and so are they."

Michael Jordan got a sense of that style at the All-Star Game. "I always wanted to see what it felt like to play for Larry," he says. "I think the players respect him so much. I look at Rik and Reggie, how they respond to him. They all respect him to a point where they're playing extremely well."

"He'll let you know if he's upset with something," Smits says, "but he lets you play and learn from your own mistakes. He doesn't make you feel bad about taking your shots. In fact, he'll get on you if you don't take them."

4 Make every pregame count

Bird and his staff adhere to the typical standards of NBA game preparation. They practice, they watch video, they pass out scouting reports, they lecture. But they also take things a step further. Probably no other team in the league gets as much accomplished before games, before the regular warmup session, as the Pacers do.

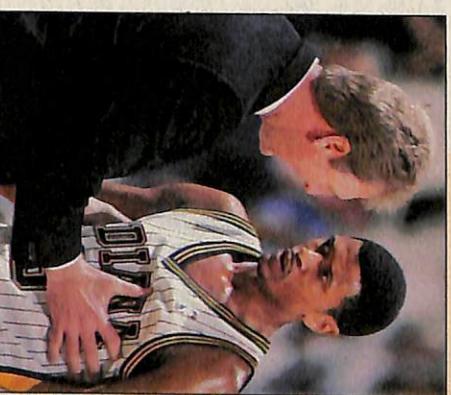
Two hours before tipoff, sometimes earlier, Carisle is on the court working with the players in a virtual practice session. They run off picks, shoot jumpers and practice moves they are likely to make during games. The sessions are voluntary, but most nights, about half a dozen of their opponents can be found milling around and shooting more breeze than basketballs.

Bird wanted to run these sessions himself, but his assistants talked him out of it. They didn't want to start a precedent that other head coaches would feel compelled to follow. But he often watches wistfully from the bench.

5 Trust your players

Bird knows from experience that the NBA is a player's game, and he believes coaches who are constantly chattering and waving their arms along the sidelines are only interfering with the work of professionals. He appreciated the passive bench ap-

TURNED LOOSE: Bird's easy-going manner is keeping Mullin (left), Miller and the rest of the team relaxed and confident.



ED NESEN / TSN

Two-for-one

Chris Mullin and Jalen Rose first met in the summer of 1993, when they played pickup games in the San Francisco Bay Area. Mullin had just averaged 25.9 points in his eighth season with Golden State. Rose, accompanying former Michigan teammate and new Warrior Chris Webber, had just completed his sophomore season.

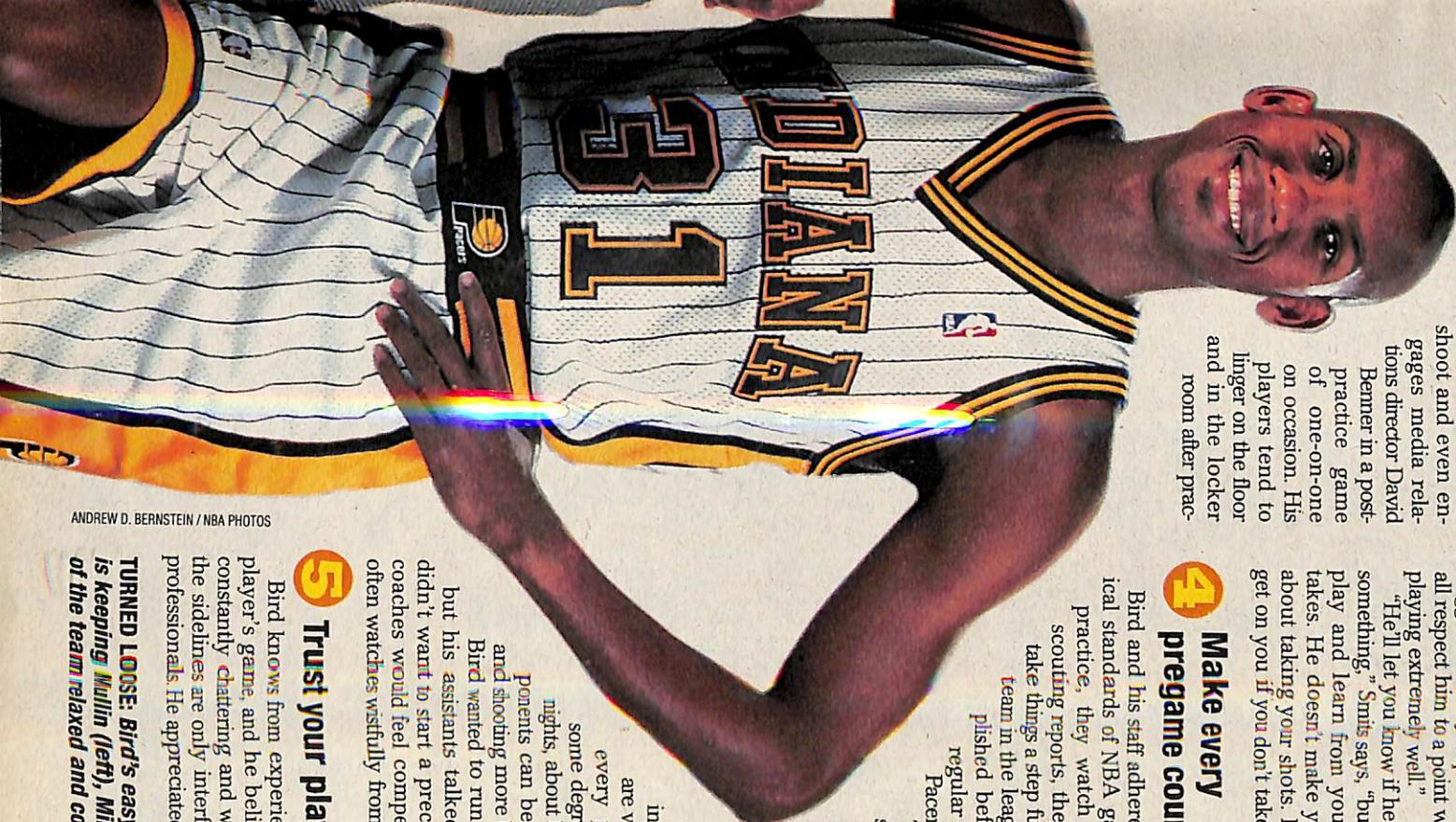
Who would have thought their careers would become so intertwined? Mullin and Rose are now tag-team partners for the Pacers, splitting time at small forward and making coach Larry Bird's job easier—and more difficult.

HOT WING: Rose is one-half of Bird's highly effective small forward combination. The two left-handers have distinctly different styles but have combined to form one effective small forward. Mullin is a page out of a basketball textbook, always playing under control, firing picture-perfect jumpers, leading the league in foul shooting (94.6 percent) and rarely committing a turnover. The more athletic and versatile Rose excels in the open court, blowing by defenders with crowd-pleasing drives.

Both have been productive. For the Pacers, Mull-Rose Place means a combined 47.5 minutes, 21.5 points, 5.4 rebounds and 4.2 assists per game. Mullin, the starter, plays 4½ more minutes per game than Rose, but Rose often finds himself on the court in the fourth quarter. (Bird tends to leave a reserve who is playing well out on the floor.)

Bird is finding it difficult to take either player out. But Mullin and Rose have made it easy for their coach to split their minutes. "I've been on teams (at Golden State) where you win and guys are upset because they didn't get enough shots or play more minutes," Mullin says. "That's when you know you're in the wrong place, and you're not on a team. That's what we have here, a team."

Rose, in his fourth season, has made a gradual and grueling transition from point guard to small forward, and from starter to backup. But he has found a productive niche on a winner, and that's good enough for now. "Chris has been a great player for a long time," Rose says. "I can't always be selfish and worry about getting Jalen Rose this, getting Jalen Rose that. I feel if I keep working hard, my time is going to come." —Mark Montieth



ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN / NBA PHOTOS

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ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN / NBA PHOTOS

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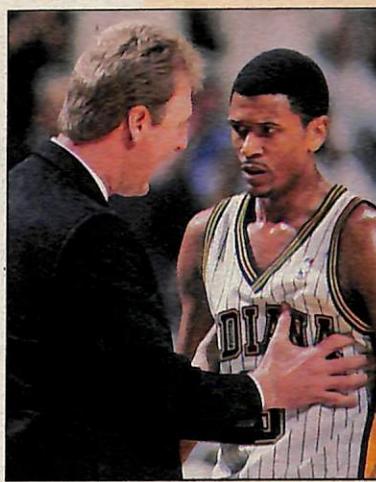
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ED NESSER / TSN

proach of another of his former Celtic coaches, K.C. Jones, and takes the same tack.

"If you're hollering and screaming at everybody, I think it takes something from them," Bird says. "The players should be putting on the show."

Bird has a veteran point guard he trusts with the offense in Jackson, and Bird figures he won't get leadership—or poise, for that matter—from anyone if he's micromanaging from the bench. Bird will get up to call an occasional play, but he gives Jackson the freedom to ignore him if Jackson believes he has a better idea.

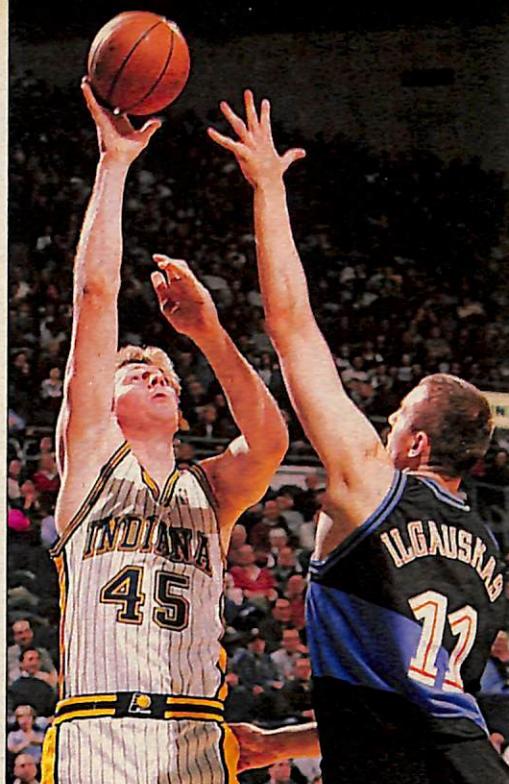
"It just boosts the confidence level of everyone on the floor," Jackson says. "You're not looking over there if you make a mistake. It's almost like a quarterback being able to step to the line, (read) the defense and (call) an audible."

6 Play it straight

Bird, the product of a small-town, blue-collar upbringing, doesn't know how to shine anyone. He's more comfortable getting right to the point. That approach has worked well with the Pacers, who, on the whole, are prideful and professional but need an occasional prod.

In his soft-spoken way, Bird has occasionally challenged a few of his players within the closed confines of the locker room after performances in which he believed they didn't give their best effort. And when the team fails to play up to its standard, he doesn't hesitate to speak out. When it played poorly in the first half of a game at Portland in December on the last night of a five-game road trip, he called the bluff.

"They were giving fake hustle," he said. "They can't fool me. I've been around this league too long. They had packed it in."



D. NESSON / TSN

HAPPENING GUY: Smits is enjoying the freedom he has on the court.

It works both ways, however. He freely passes out compliments and encouragement. When Best, a backup guard, missed a potential game-winning shot at the buzzer off a broken play in a home loss to Phoenix, Bird pulled him away from reporters in the locker room afterward to tell him not to worry about it, that Best had taken a good shot under the circumstances.

7 Include everyone

Bird never experienced the life of a bench-warmer, except in an occasional high school or college All-Star game, but he doesn't ignore those who rarely play. He sympathizes with their plight. He also knows they can destroy a team almost as rapidly as a starter if they're unhappy and complaining.

Bird spends time after practice with the rookies, going one-on-one for one play with rookie Mark Pope or rebounding foul shots for rookie Austin Croshere. Ten Pacers average 15 minutes, and Bird only wishes he could play more people.

"We have 12 guys who can play; we just don't have time to play all of them," he says. "But I have a lot of faith in my guys. I'm sure some of our starters would like to have more minutes and I don't blame them, but the other guys are just as good as they are."

"I know how important it is to have everyone ready to go if someone gets hurt."

Bird says he could do without the limelight and the media attention and the other formalities of coaching, but he enjoys the dirty work of preparation. Most of all, the games still make his adrenaline flow. He doesn't know how long he'll do it, although he's certain it won't be for a long time.

"I still wonder every day why I came back," he says. "But it's been very interesting. It's been an experience."

A deceptively difficult experience, actually. But a singularly successful one.

TSN

Mark Montieth covers the Pacers for the Indianapolis Star-News and THE SPORTING NEWS.

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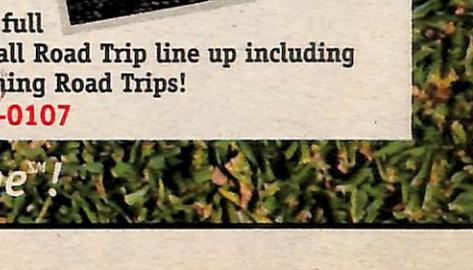
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Insider

Dave D'Alessandro

Portland is the big winner in the Stoudamire derby

As the trading deadline came to an end, we knew we were speaking on behalf of all our friends in the media when we stated the following: Hallelujah!

It's not so much that we mind chasing down every inane rumor that comes down the pike, but you have to question the sanity of anyone who keeps calling the local G.M. to get the news of the day while knowing that the latter is going to be deceptive. Keep in mind that the practice of lying comes naturally to general managers, given that they've had so much practice doing it among their peers.

But just for once, we'd like to hear them all admit that all they're doing is participating in a giant scavenger hunt to find some big goober to fill their gaping roster vacancy until the next Right Guy comes along.

For once, we had some real news, though, and it resulted from the poor Raptors having no choice but to blow it all up. In the span of about 15 minutes, they changed ownership (from Allan Slaight to the Maple Leafs), their head coach (from Darrell Walker to Butch Carter) and their go-to guy (from Damon Stoudamire to, uh, we think, Oliver Miller).

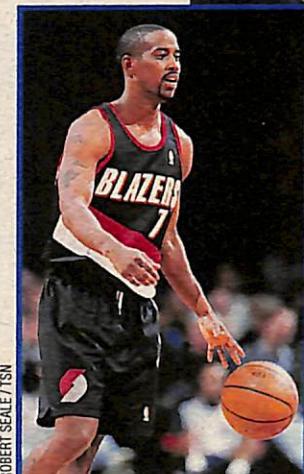
The best they could do was Kenny Anderson, Alvin Williams, Gary Trent, two draft picks and a truck full of Paul Allen's cash. Granted, the RaptorLeafs—bleeding red ink since their inception—did well in the deal financially. That's about all they did.

As we write, Kenny seems likely to be re-routed to New York, which is a sitcom waiting to happen, given that his hometown buddies find him as impressionable as Play-doh. If the Raptors keep him, they'll have a sad and miserable player who can put up numbers, which is sort of what they gave away. If they move Anderson, it's a signal they're committed to giving Williams, a rookie, a shot at the job, which he happened to do better than what Anderson did in Portland.

But even though they also acquired notorious wingnut Gary Trent in the deal, this was about basic survival. They needed cash desperately and got it, in the form of Portland paying off the remainder of Anderson's contract (about \$38 million), and they needed to build for the future, which they managed to do by acquiring two draft picks. This is important: Those draft picks could turn into quality young players, whom they also won't be able to sign long term as long as they continue to run the franchise into the ground.

In other words, the Raptors went bust. All they are left with is cap space that no one will be interested in filling this summer.

We like how the Blazers made out. The home-town hero—Oregon All-Stater Stoudamire of



ROBERT SEALE/TSN



ROBERT SEALE/TSN

TRADING PLACES: Stoudamire (top) is expected to give the Trail Blazers some leadership; Anderson could be traded again.

Wilson High—returned to claim his rightful stewardship at the head of the local team and his place at the top of Paul Allen's salary scale. He is in a marvelous position to squeeze the richest owner in pro sports. Portland is throwing all its eggs in Damon's basket, and when he becomes a free agent this summer, he'll be able to ask for

any number that comes to his agent's mind.

And Allen is so happy for the privilege, he even picked up two more contracts that nobody wanted—the ones belonging to Walt Williams and Carlos Rogers, both of whom will have to turn their seasons around dramatically if they are to crack Mike Dunleavy's rotation.

In the meantime, though, the Blazers are happy: "I think Damon has a strong mind and presence as a leader for a ballclub," Dunleavy says.

That's what this was about. The Blazers, with their wondrous athletic skill, never had the leadership to make anything of themselves. Mighty Mouse is in charge now. The Pacific Division just acquired another contender.

Ankle rankle

The Timberwolves are face-to-face with the decision they didn't want to make until much later: Tom Gugliotta's ankle needs surgery, and it apparently can't wait until summer. He received second and third opinions last week, and now it's decision time. If doctors cut, it will take six to eight weeks before the team's best player can return, which will affect its rising playoff position. If they don't, he won't be 100 percent for the rest of the season. Another consideration: Gugliotta will opt out this summer, so he might want the surgery now to show it's not a long-term problem. It won't help his market value if he plays hurt.

The big deal

Last week marked the one-year anniversary of the biggest trade (by number) in NBA history, when the Nets received five players from Dallas for four spare parts. Here's a look at how it has gone so far: The Nets, 40-41 overall, are in contention for this season's Atlantic title with a 29-21 record; Dallas, 18-67 since the deal, is one of the worst teams in the league. The Nets still have Sam Cassell and Chris Gatling; they parlayed two others (Jimmy Jackson, Eric Montross) into Keith Van Horn; the fifth guy (George McCloud) split. The Mavs still have Shawn Bradley, Khalid Reeves and Robert Pack, but the immortal Ed O'Bannon was cut loose.

Most enlightened observation: "At the time it looked like (the Mavericks) gave up a lot and, looking back now, it looks like they gave up an awful lot more," Cassell says. Least enlightened observation: "Sure, I'd do it again. I'm happy with what we got," Don Nelson said.

Don't get us started.

TSN

Dave D'Alessandro covers the NBA for the Newark (N.J.) Star-Ledger. E-Mail him at daved@sportingnews.com.

Hornets' nest

Along with the welfare of the two minors he's accused of raping, there's another big issue at stake in the Anthony Mason case—even if it gets to trial and he is found innocent. His contract contains the standard clause permitting termination if he fails to exhibit "good moral character (only about 20 or 30 players have negotiated that clause out of their contracts, we're told)," and the exact language says a player doesn't even have to break the law for termination to be possible.

In other words, given Law and Order Stern's broad interpretation of his powers—which could be upheld by John Feerick in the Sprewell arbitration case—the Commish could easily pull Mason's career out from under him if Mase wants to plead down to a misdemeanor.

Here's a grim addendum to the Mase matter, and we swear we're not making this up: Thousands of Hornets fans received their monthly issue of *Sting Magazine* in the mail Monday morning. The cover contained a picture of No. 14, with the headline, "Anthony Mason—Hornets' Passionate Leader."

The book on Cedric Henderson

Cavaliers, F 6-7 / 215

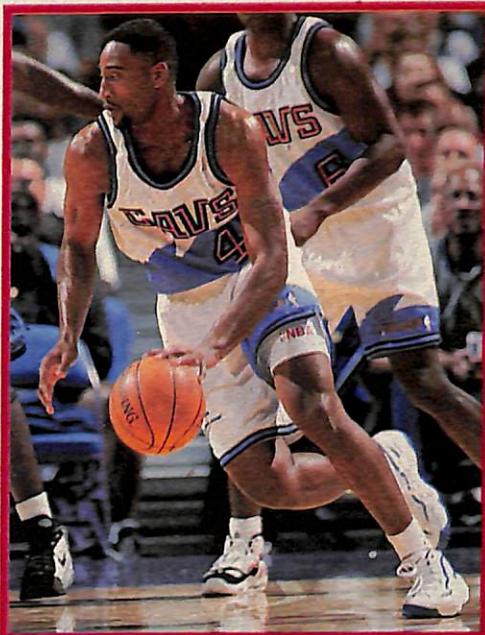
Coming out of the University of Memphis, Henderson was regarded as a solid pick when the Cavs took him with the 16th pick of the second round last June. It's clear now that evaluation was wrong. He was an outright steal.

A starter at small forward since late November, Henderson has been the find of the draft, averaging 10.3 points per game while making 50 percent of his shots. His smooth ballhandling skills and ability to slash and finish have made him a dangerous—albeit complementary—weapon for the Cavs. On several occasions, Henderson has put a charge into his teammates with an eye-popping dunk.

"He reminds me of myself because he's young, (and) he doesn't know how good he is," Shawn Kemp says. "He's making plays and probably going home and saying, 'Man, did I do that?'"

Although the range of his jumper doesn't extend to the 3-point line (he has attempted four shots from that distance and missed them all), Henderson is the team's most consistent mid-range shooter. His 15-foot jumper is a key to the team's halfcourt offense.

Henderson isn't asked to score a lot, but opponents frequently leave him



ED NEESON/TSN

open to double Kemp or center Zydrunas Ilgauskas or send extra pressure at guard Wesley Person.

Defensively, Henderson, who is averaging 4.2 rebounds, is slowly emerging as the team's designated stopper.

"He has a chance at being a terrific defensive presence, with his athleticism, quickness, long arms and reaction time," Cavaliers coach Mike Fratello says.

Not bad for someone who watched 43 players be taken in front of him.

TSN's Power Poll

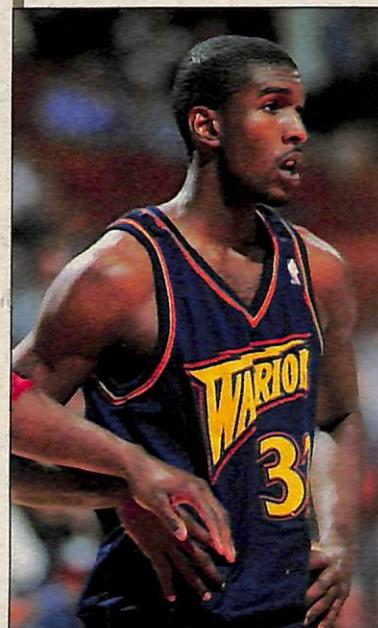
Rk.	Team	W-L	Comment
1.	Seattle	39-12	Ellis has proved you can go home again.
2.	L.A. Lakers	35-13	Lakers won't win anything until they can beat Seattle.
3.	Indiana	36-14	Pacers are 15-0 when they score 100 or more points.
4.	Chicago	37-15	Can any player get along with Krause?
5.	Utah	34-15	Sloan deserves a contract extension.
6.	San Antonio	34-16	Defensively, Perdue has been a valuable big man.
7.	Phoenix	33-16	Kidd and Nash make a good guard tandem.
8.	Miami	32-18	Mashburn's thumb injury is a huge blow.
9.	Charlotte	30-20	So far, Mad Max has been giving opponents fits.
10.	New Jersey	30-21	Nets need more from Gill in the second half.
11.	Atlanta	30-22	It all looked so promising in November.
12.	Portland	29-20	Will Stoudamire re-sign with the Blazers?
13.	Cleveland	28-22	Ferry is no longer a factor on offense.
14.	Minnesota	27-21	Injuries might catch up with the T-Wolves.
15.	New York	27-21	Knicks could use some D from Houston.
16.	Washington	27-25	Bench is more confident after playing without Webber, Howard.
17.	Milwaukee	25-25	Can the Bucks survive without Brandon for a couple of weeks?
18.	Houston	24-25	Willis has been the team's MVP this season.
19.	Orlando	24-27	Daly has to have second thoughts about taking this job.
20.	Detroit	23-26	Gentry wants Hill to handle the ball less.
21.	Boston	23-27	Lately, team has been terrible in the paint.
22.	Sacramento	22-29	All things considered, Jordan has done a respectable job.
23.	Philadelphia	15-33	Is Thomas too good to drive to work?
24.	Vancouver	14-37	The guards have to play better defensively.
25.	L.A. Clippers	11-40	Barry wants out of this sorry organization.
26.	Toronto	11-39	Who will be the next to leave?
27.	Dallas	10-40	It's time to put an end to Green's consecutive games streak.
28.	Golden State	8-40	Warriors aren't very far from Nuggets territory.
29.	Denver	5-44	Ellis wants to remain a Nugget. He must be joking.

Records are through Saturday's games. The NBA Power Poll is determined by TSN editors and columnist Dave D'Alessandro.

inside dish

FRONT OFFICE RUMBLINGS AND LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS

The Damon Stoudamire deal once again illustrates what we have known all along: The three-year rookie contract experiment is a disaster for most teams (actually, in some circles, it's known as the "three-years-and-gimme-\$100 million-or-I'm-history" rule). Sure, teams are saved from having to commit to rookies for seven years, but three years isn't enough time to decide whether these kids are worthy of megabucks, either. "If you look at that crop of (1995) rookies—the Joe Smiths, Antonio McDyess, that group—there are a number of those guys who made it clear (they) don't want to stay," Nets G.M. John Nash says. "And by waiting this long, Golden State can't get the value for Smith they could have gotten a year ago." Since December, there have been "For Sale" signs on virtually everyone in the Class of '95—players such as McDyess, Smith, Stoudamire, Jerry Stackhouse and Brent Barry. The way it's going, Minnesota may be praised for its astute foresight for getting Kevin Garnett out of the way. ... Think the



DAVID SCARBROUGH FOR TSN

FOR SALE: Smith will become a free agent after this season.

Sonics have a preference for a postseason opponent? They've now beaten the Spurs six straight times and 14 out of 18. Last week, they ended San Antonio's 15-game winning streak—no small feat considering the Spurs won those 15 by an average of nearly 17 points—and held David Robinson and Tim Duncan to two points in the fourth quarter. Earlier this season, they held both Twin Towers to single figures in scoring.

... Philadelphia's Allen Iverson used to be known as "The Answer." Now he believes "getting rid of me

might be the best answer. I'm trying my hardest, and nothing's changed. I'm not a perfect player. I know I have a lot to learn. But if they can't deal with me learning, they need to make a decision to help this team out." ... The only team to win at Indiana and Seattle this season? None other than the Mavericks. ... Isiah Thomas is telling friends he misses running a franchise. Would he consider taking a job at Denver or Golden State? The same friends say he's not going to take his kids out of school in Detroit—and his wife doesn't want to move—and that the main reason he thought the Toronto job was perfect was that it was a 30-minute flight from home.

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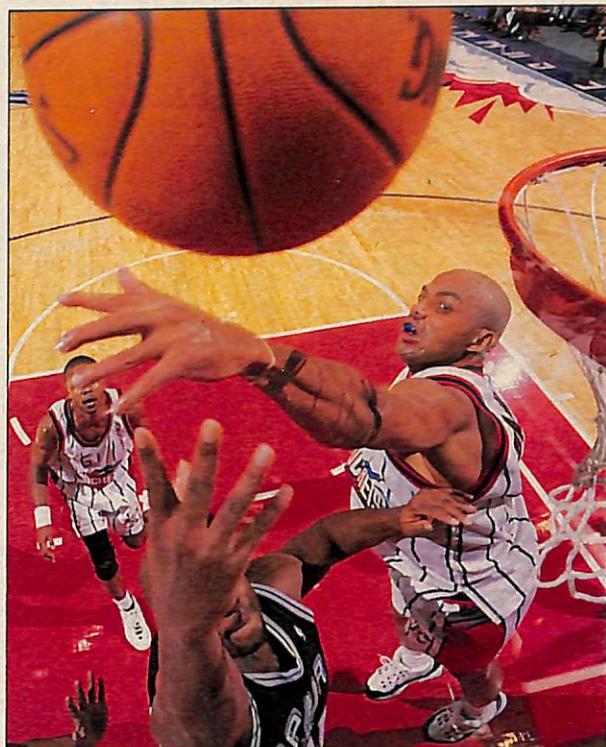
The new Camaro Z28 has 305 hp, a six-speed transmission; head-spinning style and 4-wheel disc brakes. In other words, everything it needs. And nothing it doesn't.

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Days of wonder

The excitement of All-Star weekend has faded, and the dog days of the season will soon be upon us. For the elite teams, the weeks leading to the stretch run of late March and April is a time to coast. For everyone else, it's a time to take a hard look at where they stand. Is it possible to gain momentum for the playoffs? Is it time to start thinking about next season? Here's a look at a few teams and the issues that they'll have to address:

Will Charles Barkley's move to the bench turn around the Rockets? The change, which was voluntary (Mario Elie and Kevin Willis are the starting forwards), wasn't the only big news out of Houston last week. Barkley also said he had stopped drinking because it was affecting his play. The move to the bench and the return of Hakeem Olajuwon has given the team a big lift. Showing a more balanced attack, the Rockets defeated the SuperSonics and the Lakers last week. What Barkley and Olajuwon can't do anything about, however, is the defense of point guards Matt Maloney, Brent Price and Emanual Davis. The Rockets' system is geared toward giving opposing



OFF THE PINE: Barkley's move has helped the bench.

true playoff threat unless Wesley, who is more aggressive about shooting and less about passing than Muggsy Bogues was, can blend with the frontcourt. Even if that happens, it appears the Hornets will have to deal with the statutory rape accusations against Mason the rest of the season.

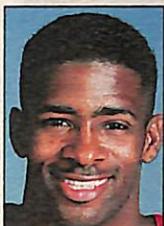
Will the Grizzlies make any progress? Vancouver wasn't expected to make any waves in the West. It was, however, with the additions of point guard Antonio Daniels and forward Otis Thorpe, supposed to take a step toward respectability. That hasn't happened, and there are rumors Thorpe has become a negative locker-room influence. It's crucial for Vancouver to show some improvement, if only to give Shareef Abdur-Rahim, a free agent in 1999, hope for the future. Otherwise, he could end up as next year's Damon Stoudamire.

Will the Celtics show some stability? Unlike the Grizzlies, the Celtics have exceeded expectations.

They entered the week 23-27 and have proved that Rick Pitino's system is more than a gimmick. Now, Pitino, who has yet to settle on a starting lineup, must get the team to be smarter in its shot selection, which has been a problem all season, and get more production at center. Seven-footer Travis Knight, who entered the week on the trading block, isn't physical enough for the position. One thing to keep in mind: Pitino might want to make massive changes this summer, but he won't have a lot of cap flexibility to do it.

Courtside chatter

WHO IS THE MOST IMPROVED PLAYER IN THE LEAGUE?



Kendall Gill, Nets:

"Donyell Marshall (Warriors), definitely. His scoring, rebounding, everything. His confidence is way up."



Erick Strickland, Mavericks:

"Kobe Bryant (Lakers). I really like the way Kobe's playing right now. He's really been low-key and consistent throughout the season. He's focused every night, and he's taking better shots."



Kenny Anderson, Raptors:

"Corliss Williamson (Kings). He's improved (when it comes to) going to the basket strong, (and he's) playing good defense—every aspect of the game."

Coming up big

Who's the best post-up player on Miami: Alonzo Mourning or Isaac Austin?

Try 6-0 guard Tim Hardaway.

"He's like a miniature Charles Barkley body down there in the post," Suns coach Danny Ainge says. "He just can out-muscle (people), then he's got the great passing skills, great ball-handling, and he's a great shooter. All those things combined make him probably the best low-post player on the Heat."

When the Heat offense stagnates, the team has been isolating Hardaway with his back to a defender, with the rest of the team spread. From that set, Hardaway can shoot a baby hook, spin for a reverse layup, pass to an open teammate or power deeper in the post, where he usually scores or gets fouled.

How does he do it? In technical terms, it's called leverage. But Trail Blazers guard and former teammate John Crotty has a simpler explanation. "It's that big butt he's got," he says. "He just puts that butt on you and backs you in, backs you in and you can't stop him."

Hardaway, however, doesn't merely rely on what he calls his "secret weapon." His knowledge of angles and other subtleties of the low block give him an extra edge.

Inside move

Orlando guard Nick Anderson may have regained his touch and confidence. Mired in a two-year slump stemming from his poor play in the 1995 Finals—his four missed free throws in the final seconds of regulation in Game 1 allowed Houston to come back and win in overtime—and unfounded criminal accusations a year ago, Anderson recently has been attacking the basket more and no longer appears afraid of getting fouled and going to the line. In one three-game stretch, he attempted 15 free throws. That might not seem like much, but it's a vast improvement over his first 30 games, in which he went to the line 20 times.

Anderson says a hand injury that forced him out for a month was a blessing in disguise. "I've gotten myself together," he says, "mentally and physically."

Off the rim

■ PIVOTAL GAME: Maybe the 50-point game by the Wizards' Tracy Murray against the Warriors last week—the league's single-game high this season—will prove to be a turning point for him. After his December 10 fight with teammate Rod Strickland, Murray kept his distance from the rest of the club, taking taxis rather than the team bus, warming up alone and keeping to himself in the locker room. But there was no tension in the Warriors game. Murray was urged by a teammate to look for his shot. The player: Strickland, who was credited with an assist on 14 of Murray's 18 baskets.

■ POWER PLAY:

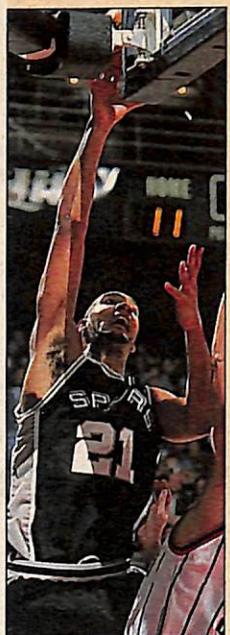
Michael Jordan isn't the only player going to bat for his coach. During All-Star weekend, Utah's Karl Malone dropped a not-so-subtle hint that the Knicks are one of the teams he would consider playing for once his contract expires at the end of next season. Sound familiar? The Jazz still haven't exercised a rollover clause in coach Jerry Sloan's contract that would extend his deal beyond next season, and the delay has clearly bothered Malone.

■ EVERY WHICH WAY:

Scottie Pippen is singlehandedly putting the wind in the Windy City. First, he shocked Chicago by demanding to be traded. Then, after returning to the team and initially keeping a low profile about his future, he hinted he would be open to coming back. Now, he's saying once again there is no chance he'll return. Maybe Pippen should consider running for public office.

DYNAMIC DUOS

The Spurs are the only team to have two players ranked in the top 10 in shots blocked per game, a distinction that has occurred only 10 times (see chart below) since this statistic was first kept (1973-74). David Robinson and rookie Tim Duncan are in eighth and ninth place, respectively, in this category.

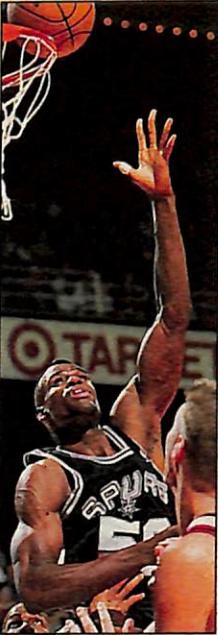


PHENOM: Duncan is the NBA's top rookie.

PHOTOS BY DAVID SCARBROUGH FOR TSN

Year	Players	Team	Blocked Shots		Rk.
			per game	Rk.	
1997-98	David Robinson Tim Duncan	Spurs	2.42	8th	
1995-96	Gheorghe Muresan Jim McIlvaine	Bullets	2.26	7th	
1994-95	Vlade Divac Elden Campbell	Lakers	2.18	7th	
1987-88	Larry Nance John Williams	Suns & Cavaliers	2.70	6th	
1986-87	Manute Bol Charles Jones	Bullets	3.68	2nd	
1981-82	Robert Parish Kevin McHale	Celtics	2.40	5th	
1981-82	Caldwell Jones Julius Erving	76ers	2.26	6th	
1979-80	Caldwell Jones Julius Erving	76ers	1.80	9th	
1978-79	Tree Rollins Dan Roundfield	Hawks	1.74	10th	
1974-75	Bob McAdoo Gar Heard	Braves	2.03	7th	
1973-74	Bob McAdoo Gar Heard	Braves	2.00	3rd	
		Braves	2.84	6th	

Not only are they in the top 10 in blocking shots, they also rank near the top in rebounding. If this keeps up, they'll be the second duo (McAdoo-Heard is the other) to rank in the top 10 in both categories. —William Ladson



ROBISON: He's the Spurs' MVP.

SOURCE: NBA

SCORING AVERAGE

NAME	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
JORDAN, Chi	52	553	378	1500	28.8
MALONE, Uta	49	467	344	1279	26.1
RICHMOND, Sac	51	402	310	1210	23.7
ROBINSON, Mil	48	456	186	1121	23.4
ROBINSON, SA	50	397	339	1134	22.7
RICE, Cha	50	394	261	1125	22.5
ABDUR-RAHIM, Van	51	406	322	1143	22.4
WALKER, Bos	50	423	190	1091	21.8
WEBBER, Was	44	404	105	952	21.6
HILL, Det	48	370	286	1028	21.4
FINLEY, Dal	50	402	199	1064	21.3
BAKER, Sea	51	418	206	1043	20.5
IVERSON, Phi	46	339	204	931	20.2
RIDER, Por	43	322	133	866	20.1
MILLER, Ind	50	322	273	1005	20.1
GUGLIOTTA, Min	41	319	183	823	20.1
SMITH, Atl	49	330	255	981	20.0
PATTON, Sea	51	360	199	991	19.4
STOUDAMIRE, Por	49	354	179	952	19.4
MARBURY, Min	48	323	227	931	19.4
HOWARD, Was	47	348	211	907	19.3
HARDAWAY, Mia	50	351	154	957	19.1
DUNCAN, SA	50	387	155	929	18.6
ALLEN, Mil	50	325	190	923	18.5
CASSELL, NJ	45	289	236	829	18.4
DREXLER, Hou	43	273	192	787	18.3
JONES, LAL	46	300	148	836	18.2
GARNETT, Min	48	348	152	851	17.7
KEMP, Cle	49	321	223	867	17.7

FIELD-GOAL PERCENTAGE

NAME	FG	AT	FG%
O'NEAL, LAL	288	484	.595
DUNCAN, SA	387	705	.549
BAKER, Sea	418	765	.546
MOURNING, Mia	183	335	.546
MUTOMBO, Atl	267	498	.536
WALLACE, Por	290	541	.536
MALONE, Uta	467	874	.534
ROBINSON, SA	397	754	.527
DIVAC, Cha	187	359	.521
J. WILLIAMS, NJ	262	503	.521
REEVES, Van	272	523	.520
MCDYESS, Phi	273	527	.518
ELLIS, Sea	236	457	.516
MANNING, Phi	258	503	.513
ILGAUSKAS, Cle	259	505	.513

3-POINT PERCENTAGE

NAME	3FG	AT	3GP%
ELLIS, Sea	82	172	.477
HORNACEK, Uta	39	82	.476
NASH, Phi	58	126	.460
MULLIN, Ind	48	106	.453
BARROS, Bos	52	118	.441
MILLER, Ind	88	206	.427
KITTLES, NJ	63	148	.426
MACK, Van	80	189	.423
RICE, Cha	76	181	.420
RICHMOND, Sac	96	229	.419
DAVIS, Dal	54	129	.419
WARD, NY	52	125	.416
ANDERSON, Orl	33	80	.413
CURRY, Cha	41	100	.410
VAN EXEL, LAL	99	242	.409

FREE-THROW PERCENTAGE

NAME	FT	AT	FT%
MULLIN, Ind	108	115	.939
HORNACEK, Uta	173	194	.892
LAETTNER, Atl	221	248	.891
ANDERSON, Cle	198	224	.884
ALLEN, Mil	190	216	.880
MILLER, Ind	273	311	.878
RICHMOND, Sac	310	354	.876
PORTER, Min	83	95	.874
HOUSTON, NY	149	172	.866
MURRAY, Was	116	134	.866
SMITH, Atl	255	296	.861
HAWKINS, Sea	117	136	.860
VAN HORN, NJ	143	167	.856
RICE, Cha	261	305	.856
JOHNSON, Phi	77	90	.856
MARTIN, LAC	112	131	.855
ARMSTRNG, Orl	105	123	.854
SCHREMPF, Sea	212	249	.851
JACKSON, Den	126	148	.851
SEALY, Det	120	142	.845
STOUDAMIRE, Por	1792	2124	.844
BARRY, LAC	102	121	.843

REBOUNDING AVERAGE

NAME	O-D	AVG
RODMAN, Chi	270	487
J. WILLIAMS, NJ	355	344
BARKLEY, Hou	187	377
DUNCAN, SA	151	422
MUTOMBO, Atl	181	398
ROBINSON, SA	173	379
WALKER, Bos	167	358
SABONIS, Por	93	375
MASON, Cha	115	393
MALONE, Uta	124	372
B.W'Liams, Det	138	297
WEBBER, Was	107	308
WRIGHT, LAC	123	281
GARNETT, Min	120	323
ILGAUSKAS, Cle	122	264
DUNCAN, SA	151	422
MUTOMBO, Atl	181	398
ROBINSON, SA	173	379
WALKER, Bos	167	358
SABONIS, Por	93	375
MASON, Cha	115	393
MALONE, Uta	124	372
B.W'Liams, Det	138	297
WEBBER, Was	107	308
WRIGHT, LAC	123	281
GARNETT, Min	120	323
ILGAUSKAS, Cle	122	264
DUNCAN, SA	151	422
MUTOMBO, Atl	181	398
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WALKER, Bos	167	358
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GARNETT, Min	120	323
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DUNCAN, SA	151	422
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WEBBER, Was	107	308
WRIGHT, LAC	123	281
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ILGAUSKAS, Cle	122	264
DUNCAN, SA	151	422
MUTOMBO, Atl		

Bucks

Once again, club misses Brandon's steady play



The importance of point guard **Terrell Brandon** has been demonstrated for a second time this season. On February 5, Brandon sprained his left ankle for a second time. Brandon felt the sprain was not as severe as the first, and that he could get back to action quicker than before. But he had missed two games going into last weekend—both losses—and was placed on the injured list last Friday. The earliest he can return is February 24 against the Lakers. The club was 2-5 when he sprained his ankle in December. If the club misses the playoffs, it can look to those ankle sprains as the major reason. ... Against Detroit on February 11, centers **Ervin Johnson** and **Andrew Lang** combined for one point in 31 minutes. Offense has been a problem for both all season. ... **Elliot Perry**, Brandon's backup, is fairly effective, but when he goes out, **Ray Allen** and **Michael Curry** have to play out of position at the point and the offense slows down noticeably. The team hasn't stepped up when Brandon has been out and needs to find a better backup floor leader. —*Gregg Hoffmann*



ROBERT SEALE/TSN

POINT BREAK: The Magic need scoring from Grant.

Cavaliers

Dose of bench power is badly needed



With the sorry state of the bench, it's imperative for someone to step up. Since rookie guard **Derek Anderson** went down January 30, the bench has been in a funk. Solid rotations and strategic moves by coach **Mike Fratello** went out the window. Frankly, Fratello has limited options on his depleted bench. One of those options is power forward **Danny Ferry**, who is having one of his worst seasons. Small forward **Henry James** is sidelined, but when he's healthy he doesn't play much because he's a defensive and rebounding liability—and strictly a 3-point shooter. Power forward/center **Vitaly Potapenko** supposedly is upset with his minutes, but he needs to be more productive and avoid foul trouble to play more. Still, he is the club's most talented bench player. ... Guard **Bob Sura** is the key to whether the club makes the playoffs. He hasn't been an instant hit since his return from an ankle injury, but he is becoming a disruptive player on defense and attacks the basket on offense with reckless abandon. ... Point guard **Brevin Knight** has leveled out a bit. His play hasn't suffered, but he hasn't had any huge games in the last couple weeks. He has gotten into foul trouble quite often lately, which drains his minutes. —*Bob Finn*

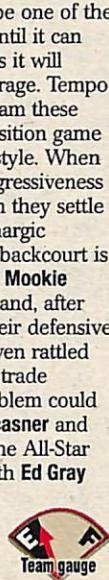


Hawks

Setting faster tempo is a must for joining the elite



This team should be one of the league's best but until it can beat the elite teams it will continue to be average. Tempo is the key to the team these days—it's better when it can get into a transition game instead of playing a methodical, halfcourt style. When the Hawks force tempo, their defensive aggressiveness transcends the entire team. However, when they settle into halfcourt pace, they can fall into a lethargic pattern. ... For the first time, it appears the backcourt is getting in sync. Last week, **Steve Smith** and **Mookie Blaylock** overmatched Milwaukee's guards and, after struggling for three quarters in Chicago, their defensive intensity disrupted the Bulls offense and even rattled **Michael Jordan**. ... **Christian Laettner** has let trade rumors destroy his confidence and the problem could linger the rest of the season. ... **Eldridge Recasner** and Laettner missed the first two games after the All-Star break, forcing the club to make moves. With **Ed Gray** sidelined for the rest of the season, **Drew Barry** was signed for the remainder of the season, and the club signed **Lloyd Daniels** to a 10-day contract. —*Mark F. Gray*



Heat

Mashburn may be out, but he won't be traded



Pat Riley insisted this was not a revelation offered out of compassion. **Jamal Mashburn**, he said, had been taken off the trade market well before the small forward suffered a thumb injury that could end his season. "I know what all the rumors are about him. But it had gotten to the point with me, that (with Mashburn) at 25 years old, I was not going to let him go anywhere," Riley said. ... Still coming through in the clutch, point guard **Tim Hardaway** has been far more uneven in his play early in games, with a recent rash of turnovers pushing his assist-to-turnover ratio below the 3-to-1 mark he needs to cash in on a contract bonus. Shooting guard **Voshon Lenard**'s play has also been uneven. Lenard tends to score most of his points early, then fade into oblivion. ... As for Mashburn's replacement at small forward, there are few options. **Terry Mills**' knee surgery will keep him out at least until late March and a finger injury is expected to keep **Mark Strickland** sidelined for at least two and a half more weeks. That leaves veteran **Dan Majerle** and **Keith Askins** as the most likely starting options the team has. —*Ira Winderman*



Bulls

This season will be Pippen's last in Chicago



Apparently, **Scottie Pippen** doesn't need any more time to decide his future. This is his final season with the team. "I want to play probably on the West Coast," Pippen says. "Right now, that's what I'm leaning towards. It's a different type of game out there. It's an open-court game; it's a lot more up-and-down game." Pippen also made it clear he is not likely to have a change of heart if the Bulls go on to win another NBA championship.

"... It would be wonderful to leave with a championship. Plus it carries a little bit of weight with me becoming a free agent" ... Coach **Phil Jackson** pointed out that he has a good working relationship with operations chief **Jerry Krause**. "Jerry and I do well in working situations," Jackson said. "... Right now, we're getting ready for the trade deadline and we have to put some time and energy into that." ... When playing back-to-back games, the team was 8-8 in the first game and 12-4 in the second through last week. You would think the records would be reversed considering the Bulls are an older team and should be more fatigued the second night. —*John Jackson*



Celtics

Pitino's tinkering brings mixed results



The team has tried to improve in several areas and has been successful in some. It has been seen as a team that is tough to play and is now slowly developing a reputation as a tough team to beat at home. Over the first 47 games, it had not lost to a team it should have beaten, another positive sign. Then came the Denver debacle. Against a 4-42 Nuggets team, the club led once, 4-2, and lost, 112-99. ... Coach **Rick Pitino** said it was time to experiment against Utah last week so he moved **Antoine Walker**, who had been playing power forward all season, to small forward in hopes of getting him better shots and keeping him away from **Karl Malone**. **Walter McCarty**, who had started every game but one, came off the bench, but was expected to be back in the starting five soon. In truth, the club experiments almost every game with weird lineups prompted by fouls or the need to press and trap. ... Once again, shot selection has surfaced as a major concern. Pitino says he has come to expect that from young teams, but the players know better. Pitino needs to start cracking down on the offending players, even Walker, because the light touch is not doing them any good. —*Peter May*



Hornets

Divac could return within next two weeks



Vlade Divac's recovery from knee surgery is going faster than expected, and he estimates he could be playing within the next two weeks. Divac had a positive test and examination of the leg last week, then ran last Thursday for the first time since he was injured January 15. ... **Vernon Maxwell** has solidified the backcourt with his explosiveness and scoring. He gives the club the offense it lacked in **Dell Curry**'s absence and the defense it has lacked while **Bobby Phills** has been out. ... Coach **Dave Cowens** continues to find ways to win games despite the team being at less than full strength, even though nobody can figure out his substitution patterns or why the club changes so much offensively from game to game. ... The frontcourt is playing well again. **Glen Rice** scored 40 in a win over Philadelphia last week, **Anthony Mason** has been solid for the last few weeks despite his off-court problems, and the club continues to win with **Matt Geiger** in the pivot while Divac is out. ... **Curry** (strained calf) was expected to return to action last week, and **Corey Beck** (pulled groin) should be back with the club during its West Coast trip. —*John Delong*



Knicks

Johnson's consistency balances Ewing's loss



Coach Jeff Van Gundy says forward Larry Johnson has been the team's most consistent player this season. Though the team has had trouble on the road and against lower-level opponents, Johnson is consistently putting up a little more than 15 points a game. Since center Patrick Ewing was lost to a broken wrist, Johnson has raised his scoring average from 11.8 points per game to 18.6. ... Power forward Charles Oakley's intimidating style of play could be hampered now that he is racking up flagrant fouls. ... How guard John Starks plays often determines how the Knicks do. In victories this season, Starks has averaged 15.6 points and shot 47.3 percent. In losses, he has averaged 13.7 points and shot 36.7 percent. Although some feel Starks' performance is down from last season, when he won the league's Sixth Man Award, Van Gundy says, "I still think he is the best off the bench in the league. People minimize the impact of Patrick's injury. A lot of his great things were done entering the ball to Patrick, living off double teams that Patrick created. I think he's played very well." —Barbara Barker



Pacers

Bird offers crash course on flying

Coach Larry Bird finds many aspects of NBA life too easy. All the luxuries laid in players' laps, particularly charter flights, which he believes make them soft. Bird talked with president Donnie Walsh about having the team fly commercial for a month in order to make the players appreciate what they have. However, the club is contractually obligated to fly charter. Bird believes the hassles of commercial airline travel help bring a team together and make it focus on the business at hand. "I just know how tough it was on us, sitting in airports, waiting on delays," he recalled of his playing career with the Celtics. "It made us better. ... The only reason we have the (charter) is so they can get their rest, get home and practice more. It's not to get to a city early so they can go out with their friends." ... It's unlikely any bench in the league gets more minutes than Indiana's, and it usually comes through. Antonio Davis and Derrick McKey have played at peak levels over the past week, and Jalen Rose has been a consistent contributor. Travis Best is more erratic, but has been instrumental in some big victories. He had 11 points without missing a shot against Miami last week. —Mark Montieth

Raptors

Will recent dealings help club emerge from mess?



That's the big question. Hard to believe there ever could be a more tumultuous two days in Raptorland. Last Thursday ended a four-year squabble between organizations when the NHL's Maple Leafs bought the Raptors and their half-finished new arena, which is scheduled to open next year. Then, last Friday brought the blockbuster deal that sent Damon Stoudamire to the Trail Blazers for Kenny Anderson and the subsequent resignation of coach Darrell Walker. Now, will Anderson show up and play? He has said on numerous occasions in the past few weeks that he doesn't want to play in Toronto. That's not a great sign. ... New interim coach Butch Carter says his main goal will be to make the players feel good about themselves, despite the instability brought on by the changes. "I'll give them some structure, but not too much," Carter says. "It has been my experience that when players are happy and confident, they'll perform." ... Gary Trent, who also was obtained in the Stoudamire trade, could provide the rebounding help the team has lacked since Popeye Jones was lost for the season with a knee injury. —Craig Daniels



Magic

Lack of offense has made Daly frustrated



Chuck Daly voiced his concerns after the team was mauled by New York last week. Orlando had no spark at the offensive end. "I think management has got to look at this and see where they want to go," Daly says. "All the people here are worried about this, that and the other thing, but they better be worried about getting a team in here that can win." Daly's frustration has as much to do with injuries at point guard as it does the team's inability to swing a deal for some offensive firepower. ... Horace Grant is steady, but 10-12 points and 8-10 rebounds a game isn't going to make the difference many nights. ... The team found out last week that Darrell Armstrong is out for the season. Mark Price is limited because of thigh strains and Penny Hardaway's strained calf won't allow him to go full speed. That leaves Derek Harper as the lone healthy point guard. ... Hardaway was the subject of trade rumors last week. It was the first time that someone indicated they might not want him. "If the Magic can sign one good free agent this summer, then I won't be looking anywhere else when I become a free agent," Hardaway says. —Bill Fay



Pistons

Gentry's changes help Hill's stamina



New coach Alvin Gentry's changes are having mixed results. The team returned to playing straight-up man defense, which worked in last week's win over Milwaukee but failed in a loss to Miami, when Alonzo Mourning, minus any double teams, scored a season-high 39 points. But Gentry's move to give some of Grant Hill's ballhandling duties to Lindsey Hunter and Joe Dumars has worked well. Now, Hill can work the wings and baselines more effectively, especially late in the game, and he says his energy in the fourth quarter is twice what it used to be. "When you've got the ball on top, teams sort of wall you in," Hill says. "Now I'll be able to get on the baseline, post up, come off screens instead of being the guy who's always setting up the offense. It's not going to be as predictable, I think. It will make us that much harder to stop." ... Hill hasn't been openly critical of team management, but heed his words after the firing of Doug Collins. When it was asserted that Hill masterminded Collins' demise, Hill essentially said he doesn't have that much power; if he did, Dikembe Mutombo, Allan Houston and possibly Damon Stoudamire would be in Detroit uniforms. —Steve Addy



76ers

Iverson ought to receive longer look at off-guard



If Larry Brown isn't happy with the way Allen Iverson has been playing point guard, the answer may be to switch the rotation. Iverson seems more confident at shooting guard when he gets an occasional shift there, and it may be time to determine if he can handle the job for longer stretches. With the addition of Eric Snow from Seattle last month, the Sixers have a player who can handle the point for more than just an emergency stint. In fact, Snow may be able to get everybody involved in a way that Iverson has not. Since the Sixers aren't going anywhere this season, it's a good time for Brown to start gambling with different combinations to see what may work for next season. ... Shooting guard Jim Jackson, who had been slumping, combined for 38 points against Dallas and Charlotte last week. Brown probably would like to see Jackson handle the ball some as a point guard, which also could get Iverson more minutes at off-guard, but Jackson has not been up to the task. ... Though he has three years left on his contract, backup center Scott Williams appears to have no role with the team. —Don Benevento



Nets

Calipari's reputation is worse than his bark



As good a season as it has been for John Calipari, he had to wince when he heard reports that Damon Stoudamire and Penny Hardaway had no interest in playing for Calipari because of the coach's reputation for yelling at his players. Calipari responded by correctly noting that several players—Sam Cassell and Chris Gatling among them—were reluctant to report from Dallas last season but now like playing for Calipari. Though Calipari indeed shouts on the sideline—sometimes quite harshly—he actually has a better relationship with his players than most coaches do with theirs. "He's got the college mentality, and he filters that into the professional game," Gatling says. "I guess a lot of players and coaches don't like that." ... Calipari had to deal with the ruffled feathers of Kendall Gill, who, along with Cassell, had been mentioned in trade rumors involving Stoudamire and Hardaway. Gill feels as if he got the team's turnaround started last season and wants to remain a key player with the Nets. To his credit, Calipari had one-on-one discussions with each Net mentioned in trade rumors. —John Brennan



Eastern Conference

Clippers

Barry plans to leave after the season



According to several sources, Brent Barry, a free agent after this season, informed the team that he has no intentions of re-signing with it. Coach Bill Fitch says plenty of teams are interested in Barry, hoping to take advantage of the Clippers' problems with re-signing players. Remember the team's last major free-agent fiasco, when

Brian Williams held out for nearly an entire season before signing with the Bulls? ... Bill Fitch's substitution patterns continue to drive players nuts. Last week, Pooh Richardson had 13 points and seven assists off the bench against Utah. His reward? Four minutes against Washington and a DNP-CD against Boston. ... This is supposed to be a critical month for the club, with 11-of-12 games at home. How has it done so far? The team was 1-4 through last Friday. Vancouver has passed it in the Western Conference standings and Dallas is closing in fast. ... Fitch needs to give guard James Robinson more minutes. He is the only player who can provide excitement off the bench, and isn't afraid to take charge. ... Forward Lorenzen Wright averaged 15 rebounds and 12 points in three games last week, including a career-high 22 rebounds against the Wizards. —Scott Wolf

Team gauge

Jazz

Injury to Ostertag leaves gaping hole in middle



Center Greg Ostertag could miss up to six weeks with a stress fracture to his lower left leg, so the team, whose success has been built around durability, will have to make some adjustments. Ostertag has limitations, mostly on offense, but he's the team's only 7-footer, only legitimate shot blocker and a much better rebounder than the two players who will take his place—Greg Foster and Antoine Carr. "It's going to be tough without (Ostertag) around," guard Howard Eisley says, "but we're all going to have to step up and play through it. Nobody is going to feel sorry for us." ... The team's top officials want to extend coach Jerry Sloan's contract beyond next season, according to team owner Larry Miller. Sloan, who currently has the longest coaching tenure with one team in the NBA, admitted he had been frustrated with team officials for not working on a contract extension earlier. But recently Miller and Sloan have talked and ironed some things out. ... Adam Keefe averaged 10 points in the team's two games last week, keeping his starting position away from Bryon Russell for the time being. —Loren Jorgensen

Team gauge

Western Conference

Lakers

Harris gives Barry starting nod over Bryant



Coach Del Harris made a gutsy move starting Jon Barry over Kobe Bryant last week and it paid off—Barry had nine points, seven assists, six rebounds and three steals. Harris still has the knack for getting production out of people in difficult circumstances. ... Robert Horry regained his job as the club's starting small forward after missing three games because of injury and coming off the bench in one more. But he says he wouldn't have had a problem turning the spot over to Corie Blount. ... The flu and subsequent sinus infection that forced Eddie Jones out of games last week produced another disruption at the guard position, where things had just returned to normal after Nick Van Exel's two-game absence because of a strained hip flexor, suffered before the All-Star break. During this stretch, the club played four of five games without at least one of its starting guards. ... Jones may have returned from his illness, but his game didn't return all the way. He clearly needed a few more days to get back to full strength. The team needs a healthy Jones down the stretch. —Scott Howard-Cooper

Team gauge

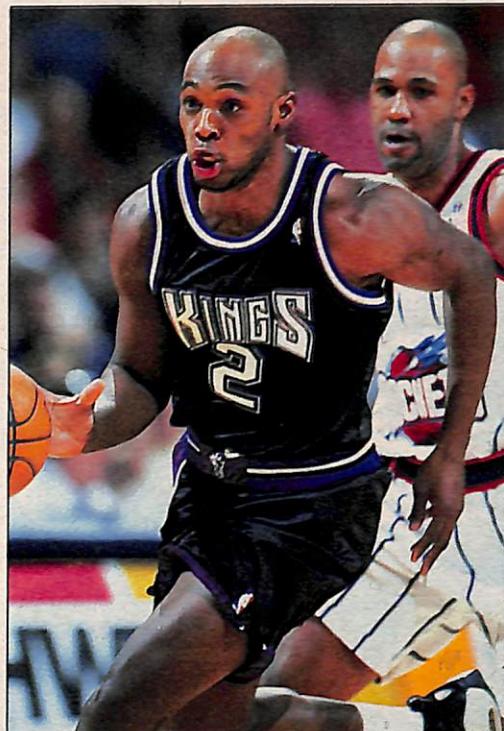
Grizzlies

Daniels returns refreshed after break



Rookie Antonio Daniels returned from All-Star weekend with a new look and a new attitude. Wearing his socks pulled up high, Daniels scored 15 points on seven-for-11 shooting and added nine assists in a loss to the Rockets. After the game, Daniels admitted he had struggled with the mental part of his game over the first half of the season, but vowed the final two months would be different. "In the first half of the season, I felt like I was playing with the weight of the world on my back," Daniels says. "Now I feel like I can play with more ease and comfort." Daniels credits a talk with veteran Clyde Drexler as being a big help to his confidence. "He had a lot of real positive words," Daniels says. "I talked to a lot of guys during All-Star weekend, to see what they thought." Daniels says he would be willing to accept a role coming off the bench if it would help the team, but coach Brian Hill says he has no plans to remove Daniels from the starting lineup. ... Lee Mayberry is known as an outside shooter, but in a recent three-game span he averaged nine points by becoming more aggressive on offense, passing up outside shots to drive more often to the hoop. —Howard Tsumura

Team gauge



ROBERT SEALE/TNS

TRADE SCHOOL: Richmond thrives despite rumors.

Kings

Smith needs to regain his animal instincts



It was as much of a surprise to power forward Michael "Animal" Smith as it was to anyone when he moved into the starting lineup last season. But this season came to a sudden stop for Smith when he broke his wrist in the fourth game. Three months later, Smith returned, but he hasn't been the same exciting player off the bench as in past seasons. And with Corliss Williamson and Billy Owens playing well, coach Eddie Jordan has opted to use Smith as a backup to center Michael Stewart. Smith says he doesn't consider this season a wash, but he must step up his play to prove otherwise. ... Owens, who will be eligible for free agency this offseason, says he is approaching this as a contract year, and he hasn't disappointed. A small forward playing power forward, Owens was averaging about 11 points and eight rebounds and shooting about 50 percent from the field through last week. He'd be even better if he could improve on his 53 percent free-throw shooting. ... Despite persistent trade rumors, Mitch Richmond has increased his level of play. In an 11-game span, he averaged 27.5 points. —James Raia

Team gauge

Nuggets

Team strikes gold with Goldwire in backup role



The knock on backup point guard Anthony Goldwire was that he didn't push the ball upcourt (back when the team was trying to run a motion offense), he couldn't break the press, and he lacked court leadership. The first few weeks of the season, Goldwire did everything to reinforce those perceptions. But in the past two weeks, he has become one of the team's more potent offensive threats. He sprints the floor, drives the lane, swarms opponents defensively and takes high-percentage shots. In a recent three-game span, Goldwire averaged 15.6 points (on 52 percent field-goal shooting). And in 22-game span, he had an assist-to-turnover ratio of 4.1 to 1. ... The team could use more scoring from center Dean Garrett (7.4 ppg through last week). Garrett's defense and rebounding have been excellent, but because the team doesn't have consistent scoring threats inside, opponents are concentrating on the Nuggets' perimeter shooters, who have been forced to drive more. ... Veteran shooting guard Johnny Newman surpassed 10,000 career points with a 3-pointer against the Kings. —Curtis Eichelberger

Team gauge

Rockets

The Stoudamire derby is far from over

The team lost out in the Damon Stoudamire sweepstakes last week, but the real winner won't be determined until July when the 5-10 point guard weighs his free-agent options. He said that re-signing with the Blazers is not automatic. Stoudamire made it clear in January that he has a fondness for Houston. The Rockets will have perhaps as much as \$8 million available under the salary cap this summer with which to pursue available talent. Without a doubt, the hunt for Stoudamire is far from over. ... The Rockets put an end to a depressing situation when they won consecutive games against Seattle and Vancouver last week. It marked the first time since December 16 and 19 that they had won two in a row. ... When Charles Barkley comes off the bench, his team has a career mark of 27-7, including 3-1 this season. Barkley came off the bench in the season opener, when he spent a week contemplating retirement, and in the first three games after the All-Star break. ... Hakeem Olajuwon looks comfortable doing everything except the jump-hook, which happens to be the foundation of all his magic. Kevin Willis slid over to power forward and didn't miss a beat. —Eddie Sefko

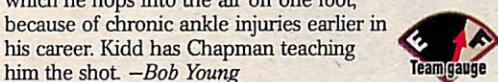


Suns

KJ is back, but his game hasn't rounded into form



Kevin Johnson has returned to the lineup and is sharing minutes with Steve Nash behind Jason Kidd. But Johnson has yet to make much of an impact. In his first couple of games after returning from arthroscopic knee surgery, Johnson did not demonstrate his customary ability to penetrate defenses. In a loss to the Trail Blazers, he did get to the rim on a couple of occasions, but he's far from his old self. ... Antonio McDyess' confidence is growing by the game. He played perhaps his best all-around game as a Sun when he scored 16 points and had 14 rebounds, five steals and four blocked shots last week against the Kings. The Suns are beginning to feel a lot better about the deal they made with Denver and Cleveland to get the 6-9 forward and about the money they'll most likely have to pay to keep him. ... Rex Chapman hit his third game-winning shot in a six-game span when his 15-foot runner beat the Kings with 1.8 seconds to play. Chapman developed his patented running shot, in which he hops into the air off one foot, because of chronic ankle injuries earlier in his career. Kidd has Chapman teaching him the shot. —Bob Young

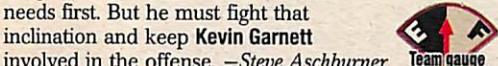


Timberwolves

With Gugliotta, Carr out, everyone must step up



With two starters—forward Tom Gugliotta and guard Chris Carr—out for the foreseeable future because of injuries, the burden to score, to defend and even just to endure major minutes falls to players whose roles were more narrowly defined two weeks ago. Terry Porter and Sam Mitchell, the team's oldest players, seem to thrive when playing about 20 to 25 minutes per game. Lately, though, they have been used almost 30 minutes a game. Backup Tom Hammonds received his first start in Gugliotta's spot against Orlando last week, and Stanley Roberts and Cherokee Parks started for the first time together in Denver. Not only are the subs less effective than the players they are replacing, but their play suffers with the extended court time. Also, the injuries leave even less help from the bench. ... Without Gugliotta there to demand the ball, Stephon Marbury, a lethal offensive player with 3-point range and penetration that breaks down defenses, could be tempted to take care of his offensive needs first. But he must fight that inclination and keep Kevin Garnett involved in the offense. —Steve Aschburner

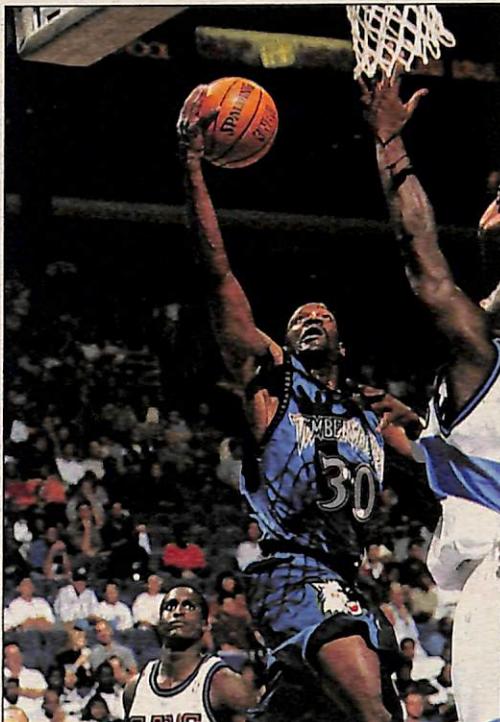


Spurs

Duncan's turnovers cause for concern



There can be little quarrel with forwards Tim Duncan, David Robinson, Will Perdue and Chuck Person. Duncan, though, must stop his propensity for turnovers when opponents run to double-team him. Person has performed well when called upon of late, nailing three 3s in a loss to Seattle. ... Jaren Jackson and Avery Johnson shot well against Seattle—3-for-6 and 8-for-11, respectively—but both had costly turnovers in the waning moments that were key plays in the loss to summarize the play of the team's backcourt. ... Not counting Person, who really is a starter if you discount the Spurs' showcasing of Perdue for trade purposes, there is little that comes from the reserves. Against Seattle, Cory Alexander and Monty Williams didn't even see action. ... Vinny Del Negro continues to gamely play through a painful right elbow as he suffers with a partially torn triceps muscle dating back to December 13 against Orlando. ... The second half will be a big test for coach Gregg Popovich, who certainly pressed all the right buttons in the first half enabling the Spurs not to lose to the patsies (24-2). But can he help them beat the good teams? That remains a huge question mark. —Kevin O'Keeffe



HEAVY LOAD: Porter is playing significant minutes.

SuperSonics

McMillan, Kersey returns will make team stronger



During the next several weeks, the team will become even stronger in terms of talent. Nate McMillan was to make his long-awaited debut Wednesday against the Trail Blazers and Jerome Kersey should be activated from the injured list in early March. McMillan, who had surgery on his right knee during the offseason and didn't have contact work until December 11, will bolster the point guard position, one of the few weaknesses on the bench. He will share time with Greg Anthony in backing up Gary Payton. "He's still the best passer on our team," coach George Karl says of McMillan. Kersey is one of the team's few players who provides rebounding and toughness. Physical play becomes conspicuous when the team loses. During a 97-83 loss to the Rockets last week, the Sonics were knocked around. ... As the trading deadline approached, the Sonics received offers for some of their top players—specifically Detlef Schrempf and Hersey Hawkins. But G.M. Wally Walker did not want to alter the team's chemistry, which Karl says is the best he has seen as a coach in the NBA. —Nunyo Demasio



Trail Blazers

Trade brings stability, if not instant success



The trade that brought Damon Stoudamire from the Raptors gives the team stability at point guard, something it had lacked with Kenny Anderson, who never fit into Mike Dunleavy's system. The team still won't make a long run in the playoffs, but at least it has a solid building block in Stoudamire, provided it can sign him. Also acquired in the deal were swing man Walt Williams and forward Carlos Rogers. Traded were Anderson, Gary Trent, Alvin Williams and two 1998 first-round picks. ... Stoudamire, a much better leader than Anderson, and J.R. Rider will be an interesting backcourt mix. Stoudamire will be asked to distribute the ball more than he did in Toronto, and Rider often will be the recipient—at least when he makes it to the arena. Look for the Blazers to have their down moments as they try to develop chemistry with Stoudamire. By season's end, though, they'll be a more formidable playoff foe. ... Trent's low-post game will be missed, but depth up front is a team strength. Williams is a perimeter player who should get plenty of minutes backing up both forwards. Rogers will have to battle for minutes up front. —Kerry Eggers



Warriors

Guard-depleted team continues to collapse



With the guard situation a mess, the team was in no position to compete. The three guards who ended the first half injured—Muggsy Bogues (hamstring), Brian Shaw (hip) and Bimbo Coles (hamstring)—remained on the sideline at the end of last week, and only Coles may return any time soon. Shaw, who has a degenerative bone injury in his hip, joined Bogues on the injured list. Thus, Tony Delk, the only available true veteran guard, has been getting heavy minutes. Teams have been trapping him relentlessly, but he has adjusted well. Duane Ferrell has been starting at shooting guard but hasn't contributed much. ... One guard who has played surprisingly well is 6-6 Brandon Williams, who joined the team from the CBA on a 10-day contract. ... Donyell Marshall, Erick Dampier and Joe Smith remain maddeningly inconsistent up front. ... Don't be surprised if the bench is full of suits the final two months. The antagonism toward coaches and management is so strong that players won't be hustling to return from injuries—especially with the season completely down the tubes. —David Steele



Western Conference

Can the North Americans learn their lessons and adapt to international play in time to catch gold fever?

1313 feet of ice

By Larry Wigge

He is standing at ice level, watching, studying his opponents. A trench coat gives him the look of a KGB agent, but Swedish defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom is nothing so sinister.

Lidstrom might be the best defenseman in the NHL. On this day in Vancouver, he is scouting the North American All-Stars and answering questions about the Olympics and Sweden's chances of winning a second straight gold medal.

"Look at how comfortable the North American players are on the smaller ice surface," he says of the 200-by-85-foot rink used in the NHL. "They don't realize the adjustments they are going to have to make at Nagano. Thirteen feet of ice (the Olympic rink is 200-by-98 feet) should not make a difference to world-class players, but it will."

"Man for man, the U.S. and Canada are better than us. But if we are patient, and they run around as individuals, some North American players are going to be in for a big surprise."

Surprise!

With dreams of gold and *Do You Believe in Miracles?* dancing in their heads, the United States dropped a 4-2 Olympics-opening decision to Sweden and then struggled to beat Belarus—yes, Belarus. Canada learned from watching tapes of the Sweden-U.S. game and hung on to beat the Swedes, 3-2, after blanking Belarus, 5-0.

"We're a little bit out of our element on the bigger ice," U.S. coach Ron Wilson says. "But as the tournament goes along, things should get better."

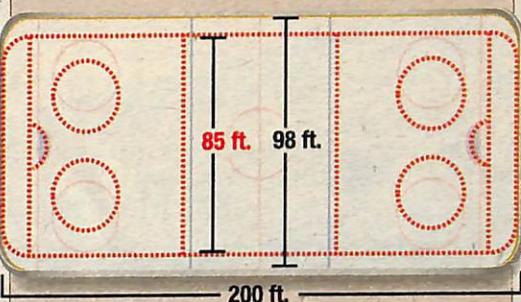
Should? Where's the confidence the Americans displayed while winning the World Cup in September 1996?

"I always felt 10 feet short of where I needed to be," U.S. right winger Brett Hull says. "The Swedes knew what they were doing, they were comfortable with all the different angles that a bigger surface presents. They moved the puck and always were in the right position. We were scattered around, tossing the puck all over the place."

The question is this: How much can a team learn in a short period of time? On the flight from North America, the Canadians had meetings and worked on a game plan. In their first practice at Nagano, there were frequent stoppages while players gathered around a chalkboard with coach Marc Crawford for strategy conferences.

"We can't change what our fabric is," Crawford says, "and I'm talking Canadian and American teams. In three days, we can't become a European team just because of the big rink. It doesn't work that way."

Lost in space The difference between NHL (....) and Olympic rink dimensions.



big hits because a forward who dishes off the puck just before getting nailed will catch the defenseman badly out of position.

With the additional two feet behind the net, a defenseman must respect the speed of a European forward. The corners are bigger and deeper, so he can't play out of control. Peter Forsberg took advantage of his speed to set up two goals against the United States. But such players as Wayne Gretzky and Doug Weight, who operate behind the net better than most, can take advantage of the Europeans in the same way.

Shooters need discipline. European teams form a box in front of the goaltender to force forwards away from the net. Firing shots from all angles won't work—unless North Americans can crash the net. And remember, the in-thecrease rule in Olympic competition is not enforced as strictly as in the NHL—so Lindros and Brendan Shanahan of Canada and John LeClair and Keith Tkachuk of the United States will get plenty of room to create havoc in front of inferior European goaltenders (Dominik Hasek excluded).



TWILIGHT ZONE: Weight (19) and other U.S. players have found that life along the boards on the wider ice surface is difficult.

Says Wilson, "We can't be Tkachukov, Roenick, LeClair or Hullov."

They looked more like Boris Badenov and Natasha Nogoodnik—out of touch and failing to clear the zone against two or three European players, who frequently trapped them and took the puck away.

As you watch the medal round, keep in mind that the U.S. team will get no more second chances. By that time, the gold medal chase will be reduced to single elimination. Inside the game, here's what the U.S. team needs to have learned to achieve success:

The concept of making a pass, then breaking and getting the puck back remains very much a part of the international game. If North American defenders aren't alert to the give-and-go, they'll be vulnerable to the home run pass.

Knowing when to hit. Watch Jeremy Roenick for the United States and Eric Lindros for Canada. They delivered frequent big hits in the early going. You must notice, however, that European forwards like to circle behind a puck-carrying defenseman, then roar past him and pick up the puck with speed. A defenseman can't gamble on

the Swedes and it resulted in eight two-on-one breaks against Mike Richter.

This ice surface is geared to speed. In the past, North Americans successfully intimidated Europeans with hitting in the neutral zone and then turned the puck into the offensive zone. That's where Lindros was at his best in the first round.

Breakout passing is a skill at which Canadian defensemen Ray Bourque, Al MacInnis and Chris Pronger excel. U.S. defensemen are mobile, but they have to lift their game another step to counteract the type of forechecking that was trapping them in their zone and causing frustration.

"Do the Swedes, Russians or Finns have a greater advantage?" Wilson asks rhetorically. "It might be a bit easier adjustment because of the way they've been taught to play. But the thing is, there's 14 percent more room out there, so guys have 14 percent more time to operate, to show their skills."

"That's not just Peter Forsberg. It's also Doug Weight and Mike Modano. Anybody who can handle the puck has more time and space to operate. No one can be standing around ... counting the millions they make in the NHL."

The book on Alberto Tomba

Alpine skiing, Italy 6-0 / 203



MIKE POWELL/ALLSPORT

Tomba was once "La Bomba," a brash young skier whose merry-go-round life revolved around wine, women and snow.

Now, at 31, with flecks of gray in his hair and circles forming beneath his eyes, Tomba talks of retirement and sounds like a jet-lagged traveler lamenting the wear and tear of the road.

Yet Tomba still is racing, chasing after Olympic medals and one last chance for greatness. He is a dominant personality in a sport filled with one-dimensional ski technicians.

While waiting for a chance to prove he could still ski—his first race, the Super-G, was delayed by the weather—he met with the

media looking more like an international movie star than a skier.

And as he entered the packed auditorium, he bowed. No athlete can work a room like him. He dominates it, drawing everyone's attention like a magnet.

"Many people follow me. They love me. They care about me," Tomba says. "Last year (at the World Championships in Nagano) things did not go that well. Let's see what goes on next week. I'm hopeful."

"I think all the bad luck I've had over the last few years should not fall on these Games."

Part of that bad luck comes with the territory of an aging athlete. Since winning the men's

slalom world title two years ago, Tomba has won only two of 24 World Cup races.

But the truth is, skiing needs Tomba more than he needs skiing. He remains the sport's most famous athlete. And he forged that fame in the Olympics.

He simply is the best skier in Olympic history. Never mind his three gold and two silver medals. What was always best about Tomba is not what he did, but how he did it.

He is as comfortable on the world stage as a baby in its mother's arms. Supremely confident, his best races were the ones in which he got himself behind in the morning—he never was a morning person; his nights were infinite—and then charged ahead with miracle finishes.

Unlike many European skiers who grew timid on the Olympic stage, Tomba embraced the Games, played them for all they were worth.

"Of course, there are memories," he says. "We cannot live on our memories. I have won everything that can be won."

Including—no matter what happens this week—his place in Olympic lore.

Street smarts

Picabo Street is poised to leave her mark on these Games as the first U.S. woman since 1952 to win two gold medals. As of last Sunday, she still was waiting to ski in the downhill—her strongest event—after already picking up an unexpected gold medal in the women's Super G.

What's remarkable is that Street has overcome injuries that have brought down the likes of Jerry Rice and Steve Young. She blew out her left knee in late 1996 for the second time in seven years. During her operation, she had only a local anesthetic, staying awake to watch her doctor perform the surgery. Then just two weeks ago, Street suffered a Young-like concussion during a downhill race in Sweden, losing consciousness from a fall caused when one of her bindings broke.

It seemed like a bad omen after her injury-plagued year. Except to those who know her.

"That girl?" Diann Roffe-Steinrotter said. "Who cares if she gets hurt? Her head is stronger than her body. She has an aura."

NAGANO NOTEBOOK

Black Eye

Midway through the Games, CBS was in the midst of an Olympic ratings nightmare. And the reasons were many, among them: the 14-hour time difference (ET), the weather delays, the slow start for the Americans. The network has to rally the final week, or these Games could prove disastrous.

With some nights generating little more excitement than a baseball rain delay, ratings are down 35 percent from Lillehammer (1994) and the Eye has yet to match the ratings from the 1992 Albertville Games.

Climate control

Perhaps the gods are angry at CBS for building a TV studio so close to a temple. Or maybe they're angry Martha Stewart showed up. Whatever, the weather has upstaged these Games leaving everyone from the organizing committee to CBS execs scrambling.

"They are fighting and fighting," IOC official Francois Carrard said of crews struggling to keep venues open. Still, as of last Sunday, not a single alpine event had been held on schedule.

inside dish

OLYMPIC VILLAGE RUMBLINGS AND WHISPERS

Thanks to Austrian skier Hermann Maier for giving the folks back home an indelible Olympic TV moment: Maier sailing like a jet plane out of control 12 feet above and some 60 feet down the icy downhill run, leading with his head and shoulders. "Not Lufthansa, but OK," Maier said. Miraculously, "The Herminator" suffered only bumps and bruises. ... So how did moguls skier **Jonny Moseley** celebrate being the first American to win gold? The obligatory appearance on **David Letterman**'s show, of course, but before he left Nagano he had his hair trimmed by a Japanese barber named Takeshi and spent hours in the Olympic village's game room playing Top Skater for free. ... Over at the M-Wave, U.S. speed skaters are struggling. And American **Casey FitzRandolph** knows why. "I don't think it's a coincidence the clap skates were approved on short notice and the Dutch are doing so well at these Olympics," he says. "And I don't think the skates are going anywhere, not when the bigwigs on the (International Skating Union) are from The Netherlands." ... We're happy to report **Wayne Gretzky** can finally walk around the Olympic village without being mobbed. Memo to **Gary Bettman**: We're also happy to report Gretzky can skate around the rink at Big Hat without being mobbed, too. ... German **Georg Hackl** ("The Racing Sausage") won his third straight Olympic gold in the luge before heading indoors: "My feet are cold," he said. ... And finally, amid all the hoopla surrounding Canadian **Ross Rebagliati** was the overlooked fact members of the U.S. snowboarding team tested positive for Mountain Dew.



HERE'S JONNY:
Moseley's mogul masterpiece won the U.S. team's first gold.

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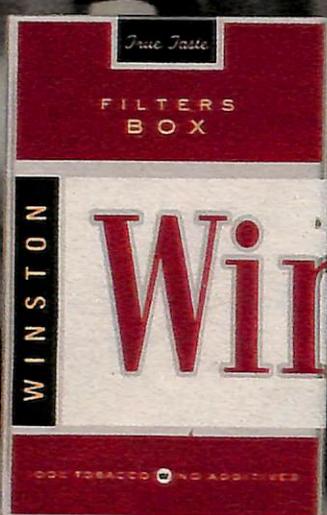
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Larry Wigge

Friend or enemy? Old loyalties are put on ice

Brett Hull and Gary Suter are sitting in a bar at Nagano's Olympic village, only a couple of days before the United States will meet Canada in the teams' final first-round game. Suter is approached by a friendly fan.

"Hey, Gary, are you still wearing No. 20?" the fan asks.

"Yeah, why?" Suter says.

"So I can tell Eric."

"Eric who?"

"Eric Lindros."

While Suter says he isn't concerned about Lindros or anybody else taking a cheap shot at him, he knows the possibility exists because it was his crosscheck during an NHL game that put Canadian star Paul Kariya out of the Olympics with a concussion. This little anecdote is a simple reminder that when the battle lines are drawn with gold and national pride at stake, friendships and long-term alliances are cast aside.

"Right now, the enemy feeling is there," U.S. center Doug Weight admits. "Everyone hates to be around the other team. You pretty much nod hello and keep going. That's what happened when I ran into Curtis (Joseph, his Edmonton teammate) the other day."

Canadian (and Detroit) winger Brendan Shanahan agrees: "I played against (Theo) Fleury the other night (in an NHL game). He was an enemy that night ... and now a friend. When we get back home, he'll be an enemy again. ... No guy who's standing in front of the net trying to keep me from scoring is my friend. Hockey players can separate those things. You see brothers go out and whack each other. Friends do, too."

Watching NHL teammates, separated by patriotism and forgotten loyalties, is the competitive spirit that made the World Cup so exciting. Those same battle lines clearly were being drawn for the Olympics, even before the teams began playing at Nagano.

Here's my vote for the best stories inside the Olympic hockey competition:

Stanley steamer ... in February. Patrick Roy talks about the Olympics like the Stanley Cup finals—and that requires an adjustment. It's only the beginning of February, and he's already approaching the game with an intensity he usually reserves for the playoffs.

"I began to challenge myself to stop everything, even shots in practice like it was the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals," he says. "You will burn yourself out if you take every game as seriously as

you do in the playoffs, but being ready for the Olympics is that important to me."

"I've got three Stanley Cups, and I want a gold medal, too."

Warning to Olympic shooters: Roy has his playoff game face on.

Eric the dread. It took Lindros all of 30 seconds to show how he feels about his challenge as captain of Team Canada, an honor he was given over such veterans as Wayne Gretzky, Ray Bourque and Steve Yzerman.

Prowling along the right boards, Lindros steamrolled Belarus defenseman Igor Matushkin. On his second shift, Lindros leveled defenseman Oleg Romanov. And he added two goals, to boot.

Says Gretzky: "Eric is determined to make a statement here—and get a gold medal."

Another gold? Peter Forsberg was the man who scored the winning goal for Sweden in a 1994 shootout at Lillehammer, earning a gold medal as well as a postage stamp with his likeness in his native land. Forsberg's father, Kent, the coach for this year's Swedish team, says Peter can carry a team, but he will never put himself ahead of team goals.

"I remember when he was 8," Kent says. "He came home from a game crying. I asked what was wrong, and he said, 'We lost, we lost.' I asked what the score was, and he said 8-7. Then I asked if he scored. He said, 'I got all of the goals—but we lost, we lost.'

Dominating. The one player feared more than any other at the Olympics is Czech Republic goaltender Dominik Hasek.

"You can attempt to contain a forward or defenseman, but there's not much you can do against a goalie," Yzerman says. "You just keep shooting and hope they go in. There's no plan of attack for a hot goaltender."

The Sergei factor. Anybody doubting the condition of free-agent holdout Sergei Fedorov, who had not played since the Red Wings clinched the Stanley Cup last June, got a quick answer. Fedorov scored on his first Olympics shift against Kazakhstan, had three first-period breakaways and finished the night with one goal and one assist.

For those keeping tabs on the Fedorov sweepstakes, TSN has learned the Islanders will submit another offer sheet to Fedorov with this kicker: a \$20 million bonus if he leads the team to the Stanley Cup finals. Since the Red Wings won it last year and are one of the top contenders again this year, that type of quick hit would be too much to expect. The Islanders are at least a year away from being a real contender.

Associate editor Larry Wigge covers hockey for THE SPORTING NEWS. E-mail him at wigge@sportingnews.com.



CHECK: Niklas Sundstrom (left) and Brian Leetch are NHL teammates, Olympic enemies.

Olympic rings

The Red Wings' Nicklas Lidstrom is the best one-on-one defender in the game today. He has leaped to the top in voting for the Norris Trophy as the NHL's best defenseman. ... Jeremy Roenick isn't finished. Just free him from Phoenix coach Jim Schoenfeld's stifling defensive game plan, put him in a creative offense and watch him regain his scoring touch. ... The Blues' hopes that Brett Hull would shine at Nagano and get another team interested before the NHL's March 25 trade deadline won't materialize. Hull, a 33-year-old potential free agent, can't keep up on the bigger ice surface and won't score like he did in the World Cup. ... Mikael Renberg might not have the speed and strength he showed when he was a member of Philadelphia's Legion of Doom line, but his passing and shooting talent reappeared at the Olympic Games—making him, and not goalie Daren Puppa, the most likely player to be dealt by Tampa Bay before the trade deadline. ... Forget any other pretenders: Vancouver defenseman Mattias Ohlund is a lock for Rookie of the Year. He is thriving while getting 30 minutes of ice time every night from Canucks coach Mike Keenan.

inside dish

FRONT OFFICE
RUMBLINGS
AND LOCKER
ROOM
WHISPERS
FROM LARRY
WIGGE



HANS DERK/AP

LIGHTNING REFLEXES: Zamuner is no Jaromir Jagr, but he is an Olympian.

Would you pay top dollar to see your favorite team play the Flyers, Red Wings or Avalanche? Maybe less to see Tampa Bay, Carolina or Calgary? No knock on Tampa's **Rob Zamuner**, but he isn't a **Jaromir Jagr** now is he? The Sabres' hierarchy seems convinced that Buffalo fans turn out in bigger numbers for what they perceive to be better teams. In one scenario, the team plans to charge current prices for a top draw—and discount tickets for lesser attractions. But coach **Lindy Ruff** sees a downside. "I wouldn't want a team coming in thinking we didn't think much of them. I know I would notice if I were on the team that was being discounted." Wait until the NHL, which considers all teams worthy attractions, hears this one. ... Phoenix forward **Jeremy Roenick** after listening to Flyers and Team Canada G.M. **Bobby Clarke** say **Gary Suter** shouldn't be playing in the Olympics because he is still under suspension by the NHL for crosschecking **Paul Kariya** and putting him out of the Games: "Isn't that the worst case of hypocrisy. Clarke, after all, intentionally broke the leg of a Soviet player in the 1972 Summit Series, didn't he? Since when did the Broad Street Bully turn into the Pope on us?" ... Former Panthers coach **Doug MacLean** has resurfaced as G.M. of the expansion Columbus team. Don't think he didn't learn a lot about building a team from old buddy **Bryan Murray**, when the two were laying the groundwork for the Stanley Cup-champion Red Wings. When the Panthers miss out on the playoffs this year, MacLean will be vindicated for management firing him because it was worried that his tantrums behind the bench might hurt ticket sales in the team's new arena next season. ... Insiders say the Rangers would have traded defenseman **Alexander Karpovtsev** to Phoenix for center **Chad Kilger** before the Olympics if not for Karpovtsev's sore wrist. You can also add **Pat LaFontaine**, **Mike Keane**, **Brian Skrudland** and **Adam Graves** to the trade list. After all, the Rangers have 25 games remaining after the break, and 11 are against teams that rank among the NHL's top 10. So a serious playoff run is unlikely, since this team has won consecutive games only twice all season.

A new dimension

Forget, for a moment, the North Americans bashing over their problems on the wider ice surface, close your eyes and think about the long-term influence Europeans have brought to the hockey-viewing public.

Think about Jaromir Jagr coming out of the corner. Think about Sergei Fedorov or Pavel Bure accelerating through center ice. Think about the tic-tac-toe passing of the Stastny brothers.

"Sure, I can remember when they first came in; we didn't like that they had guaranteed jobs and couldn't be sent to the minors," says former Canucks tough guy Tiger Williams. "But think about the skill Borje Salming and Inge Hammarstrom brought with them to Toronto in about 1973. They were great, great players and yet they were ridiculed by former Maple Leafs owner Harold Ballard, who scoffed that if Hammarstrom put an egg in each pocket and went into the corner he wouldn't break either egg. In today's game, with their talent level, they'd dominate."

"And my old Canucks team wouldn't have gotten to the finals in 1982 without Jiri Bubla and Ivan Hlinka from Czechoslovakia and Thomas Grdin, Lars Molin and Lars Lindgren from Sweden. They brought a different look to the game, something the Canadian guys needed if they wanted to be a world league."

"Now, I watch the skill that a Mattias Ohlund brings to the Canucks and some day I hope we see the first Chinese player, all the ethnic backgrounds. It brings in more fans, more interest. It's the best for the NHL."

Houston bound

Remember the attempted Oilers purchase last fall by Les Alexander, owner of the NBA's Houston Rockets, that would have kept the team in Edmonton for three years? That plan seemingly was crosschecked into oblivion by members of the Edmonton Northlands Coliseum Group and an agreement, signed by team owner Peter Pocklington, that apparently locked the Oilers into that arena until 2004. Well, Les has returned to Edmonton—and this time he wants to take the team to Houston next season.

Alexander has re-entered the picture with an \$82.5 million offer to buy the Oilers. Edmonton interests have until March 13 to come up with \$70 million to keep the team—and they reportedly have raised only about \$35 million so far.

Alexander is so confident he will have the team playing in Houston next season he put up a non-refundable \$5 million deposit as part of the purchase price. When was the last time you heard of anyone throwing away \$5 million on a whim?

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Enforcers of the Ice

One key component on every winning team is a player who can not only score, but also play a physical style of game that forces opponents to think twice about hitting a franchise player. Whether it's protecting a linemate or sending a message, hockey fans know there is a place on every team for an "Enforcer of the Ice."



This week's Enforcer:
Adam Graves

New York Rangers

Height: 6-foot

Weight: 205 lbs.

NHL experience: 11 years

NHL All-Star: 1994

Career hat tricks: six

Playing in his eleventh NHL season, Adam Graves has been a member of two Stanley Cup champions (Edmonton '90, NY Rangers '94). Over his seven years with the Rangers, the 29-year-old Toronto native has been one of the key contributors on the ice and in the locker room. He scored 52 goals in '94 when the Rangers captured their first Cup in more than fifty years. This being his first Ranger season without Mark Messier, Graves realizes he has to pick up more of the scoring slack in the squad's final 25 regular season games. Off the ice, Graves volunteers his time and efforts with several of the area charities. Opponents only wish he was as charitable on the ice. His rugged style of play earns Adam this week's "Enforcer of the Ice" award.

Watch the NHL on ESPN:
Florida at Detroit, February 27, 7:30pm

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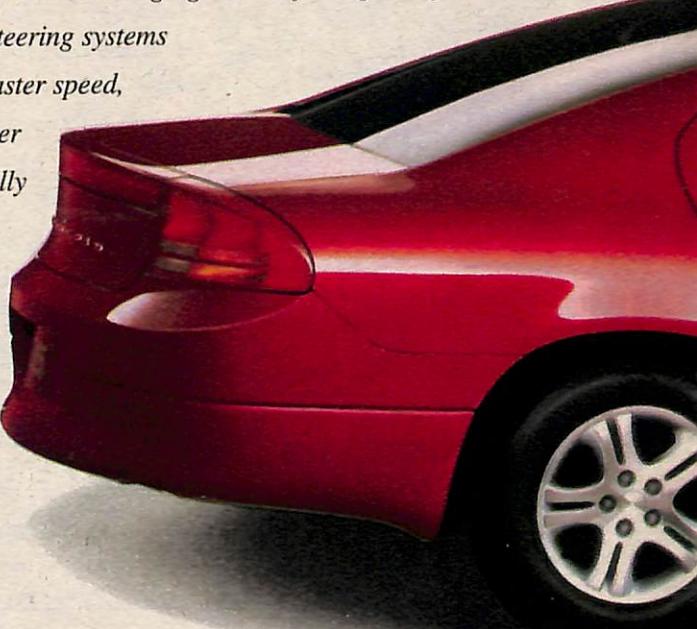
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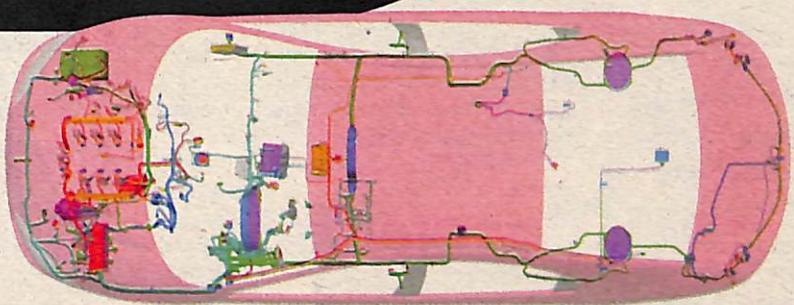
electronic network that's twice as fast as previous designs, this microprocessor controller contributes significantly to the performance and economy gains that Dodge engineers achieved. For example, an

advanced knock-control system can distinguish between noise and engine knock. Consequently, it is able to maintain optimum ignition advance. The result is improved efficiency and power. To further enhance fuel economy, this remarkable on-board computer has the ability to achieve a low idle speed for minimum fuel consumption. When charging or power-steering systems require a faster speed, the computer automatically raises it. Intrepid's available

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RECRUITING

RUSSIA

By Michelle Smith

Svetlana Abrosimova never heard of Rebecca Lobo during her days of legend at Connecticut.

"I knew about her after Atlanta (site of the 1996 Olympics)," she says. "We never watch college games in Russia."

Michael Jordan, on the other hand ...

"We get NBA games once a week on television, and I always watch those. Michael is my favorite," says Abrosimova of St. Petersburg, a freshman forward at UConn.

Some things just transcend international barriers. Women's basketball is finally reaching that point as well.

And the growing presence in the college game of foreign players, many from Eastern European nations who were not even teenagers when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, is an equal-opportunity arrangement. Not only can players take advantage of superior facilities and competition and possibly make inroads to the wealthier American pro leagues, but colleges, with more pressure than ever to win, have a new and bountiful source of talented players, many of whom started playing much earlier than American girls.

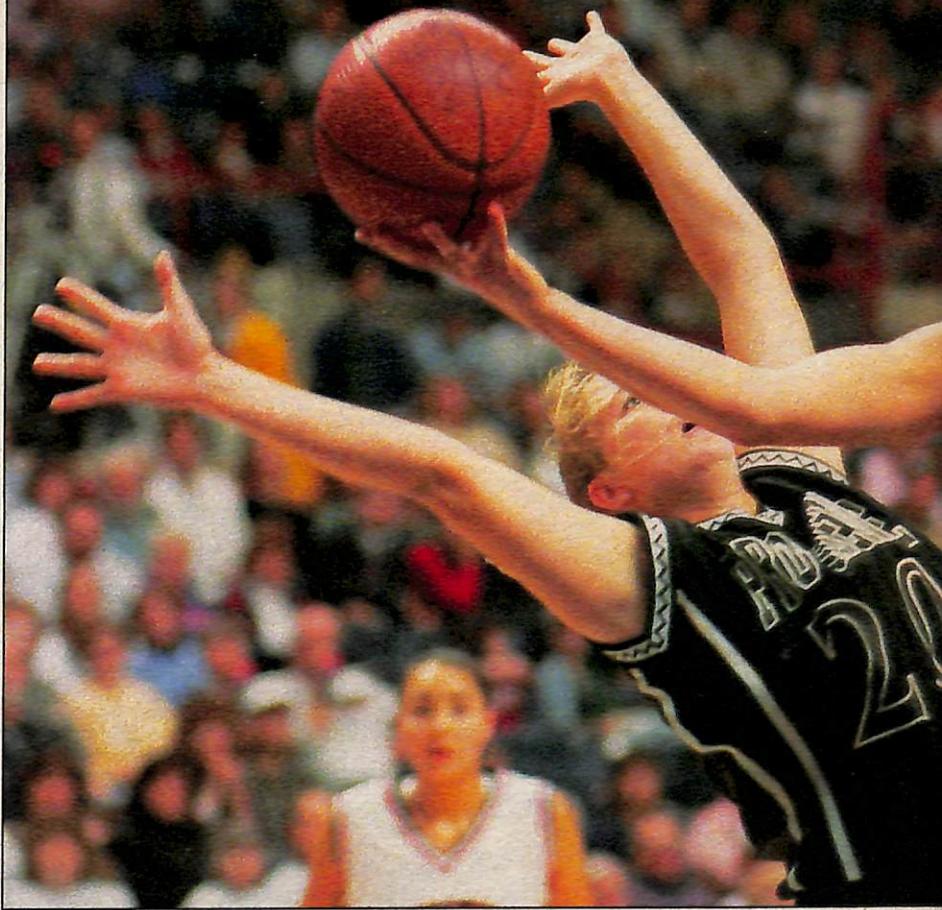
And as Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma has discovered with Abrosimova, the results are worth the considerable effort of overseas recruiting, dealing with foreign governments, federations and coaches and making sure players meet U.S. academic requirements.

While Abrosimova flourishes in the Huskies' starting lineup, Hungarian Dalma Ivanyi is one of the nation's most exciting players at a place few might notice until NCAA Tournament-time, Florida International. Elena Vishniakova, another freshman from St. Petersburg and an acquaintance of Abrosimova's, spent two of her high school years in the U.S. as an exchange student in South Carolina before deciding to stay and offer some help under the basket at Georgia; and Korie Hlede, a senior guard from Zagreb, Croatia, aims at the national scoring title for Duquesne.

"This is such a big chance for us," says Ivanyi, who led the nation in assists last week with 9.9 a game. "We want to show we deserve to be here. With the way money is at home, there is no way we could afford this, and it is one of the biggest chances of our life."

Florida International, a commuter school of 30,000 in Miami, has a tradition of recruiting players overseas. Eight of the 14 players on FIU's roster come from Europe, including Ivanyi and Bulgarian center Gergana Branzova, whose 61.5 percent shooting from the field ranked 10th in the nation.

"(Recruiting overseas) is not an easy thing to do by any means," FIU coach Cindy Russo says. "But many years back, not every conference had an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament, and ours didn't so I found myself out of the re-



With the Iron Curtain long fallen and the need to win such as UConn's Svetlana Abrosimova are making a

recruiting arena with top American kids."

It has been a successful tactic for Russo, in the midst of her 17th straight winning season and 13th 20-win season in the last 14 years. But getting international players was no small task in the early 1980s.

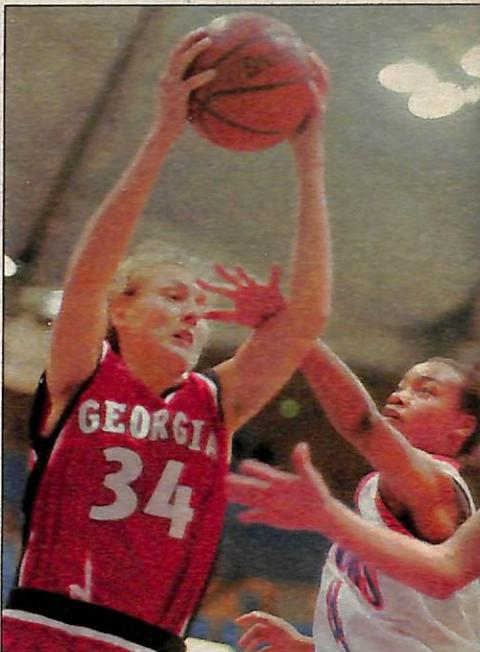
"Things were much tighter in the Eastern European blocs," Russo says. "Many times I didn't get past first base. I didn't have the contacts. But now there are many more tournaments, and the heads are turned our way a lot more. They are a little more trusting."

Abrosimova's career at UConn was arranged by a Russian coach, Boris Lelchitski, working in South Carolina. The coach sent a tape to Auriemma, who saw her play in the 1997 Junior Worlds and offered her a scholarship.

And Abrosimova, MVP of the 1996 European Championships, won't even be 18 until July. But she has made a quick adjustment, not only to the game, but to the crowds and media. She made the starting lineup following a 14-point, five-rebound and four-steal showing at top-ranked Tennessee on January 3. In front of more than 16,000 fans at Hartford Civic Center two weeks later, she scored a career-high 27 points with 11 rebounds in then-No. 3 UConn's 93-75 win over then-No. 2 Old Dominion.

After the game, Auriemma called the 6-1 Abrosimova "a very special kid. ... She has a purpose to everything she does. I knew in September she was going to be very, very good."

While she is prone to freshman-type mistakes—she leads the team in



VIRGINIA MARSHALL/AP

turnovers—she is a creative open-court player with quickness, agility, a deft shooting touch and improving defensive skills—she ranks third on the team with 64 steals. Connecticut's four-guard attack also makes it necessary for her to rebound aggressively—she's among team leaders with nearly six a game.

"I just wanted to come here and play well," says Abrosimova, named Big East rookie of the week six times. "For some people it's just a dream to play in the United States. Now that I've spent four months with this team, I understand my teammates and coaches much better."



STEPHEN DUNN / THE HARTFORD COURANT

invariably on the rise, Eastern European players greater impact than ever on the women's game

Westward bound

Among international players influencing the U.S. college game, these four from Eastern Europe stand out this year:

- **Svetlana Abrosimova**, Connecticut, 6-1 freshman forward
- **Elena Vishniakova**, Georgia 6-3 freshman forward
- **Dalma Ivanyi**, Florida Int'l. 5-10 junior guard
- **Korie Hlede**, Duquesne 5-9 senior guard



FRESHMEN FOREIGN LEGIONS: UConn's Abrosimova (top) and Georgia's Vishniakova (left) have brought a touch of finesse to their teams in the States.

Ivanyi had never seen an ocean before coming to Miami. Her only trip to the United States had been a three-week tour in Texas with a team of European all-stars.

"We drove all around in two rented

vans. It was nice," says Ivanyi, who, like many of the European players, has mastered the English language.

Nice enough for her to come back on a more permanent basis. She first considered it in high school and spoke to a Hungarian coach with contacts in the United States. She missed her first chance to take the SAT—a requirement for all foreign students. She passed the test during the summer of 1995 and found herself in south Florida by fall.

"I wanted to come and try myself out here in the country. It's a higher level of play and a style of play that was different to me," Ivanyi says. "It gives me more freedom and allows me to create my own shots. I am very happy I chose to come."

As is Russo, Ivanyi is the queen of the outlet pass and runs FIU's transition game to near perfection with an uncanny sense of whether to drive the lane or dish. Although she is a strong defensive player, accounting for nearly 30 percent of FIU's steals, she is not careless and has yet to foul out of a game this season.

But coming to the States doesn't mean abandoning their countries. Ivanyi has gone home the past two summers and will play for the Hungarian National Team this summer in the World Championships in Berlin.

"When I go home, the coaches here want me to work out a little bit and they gave me this list of exercises to do," Ivanyi says. "I had to tell them I can't do all of these because we don't have this kind of equipment at home."

Hlede, a 5-9 senior, was third in the nation in scoring last week, averaging 27.1 points a game for Duquesne. She is a scoring machine in every sense, from the drive to the hoop, to the reverse layup to the 3-pointer. While not often a point guard, she is a very capable ballhandler, having compiled more than 135 assists this year.

She is hoping to parlay her success into a professional career in the U.S. "Once you leave the U.S., it's hard to get back so I would like to stay," Hlede says.

Her family still lives in the Croatian capital of Zagreb, where peace has reigned the past three years since fighting with Serbia died down. The village where she grew up near the Serbian border, however, was nearly destroyed by the war.

"My cousin is an invalid now because he was fighting, and I have lost a couple of friends," Hlede says. "But things have been very peaceful for a while. We've seen planes flying over and sirens, but no real fighting."

"I am where I want to be, and I couldn't be that confined within Croatia. I wanted to be someplace where I could be what I am capable of being, and I had to move away from my family to do that," Hlede says. "I know that is selfish, but it's what I had to do."

Vishniakova, a 6-3 forward, came to America three years ago with her high school team to play in a tournament in South Carolina and decided to return as an exchange student at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia. She played point guard her senior season and was a *Parade* second-team All-America as well as South Carolina Prep Player of the Year.

"She has excellent passing skills for a player her size," Georgia coach Andy Landers says of his team's leading rebounder and shot blocker. "She is an excellent ballhandler, and she can put it on the floor and pull it up and shoot."

He also says she is typical of the three international players he has coached with the Bulldogs. "For their size, European players have a better sense of the perimeter game than most of the taller American kids, but a lesser appreciation for physical play and defense."

Vishniakova concurs.

"In Europe, they don't play physical basketball. There are a lot of finesse players," says Vishniakova, who has struggled with fouls. "I have had to be more physical, play defense as a forward, not like a point guard the way they do in Russia."

All of the players agree the European game is less physical and less demanding on the defensive end than the American version.

These players exhibit quickness, agility and a universal gratitude for the opportunity of their lifetime. Says Ivanyi: "We want to show the coaches who trusted us and took a chance to bring us here that we can compete."

TSN

Michelle Smith is a free-lance writer based in the Bay Area.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL



Mike DeCourcy

An eight or nine seed is hazardous to your health

The fairest way to construct the field for the 1998 NCAA Tournament might be to start by collecting all the coaches who have griped in the past about being a 10th, 11th or 12th seed and stashing them in this season's 8-9 games.

Guys who talk that dumb deserve a dose of Duke, Arizona, Kansas or North Carolina.

It happens every year. One or two coaches whose teams earn at-large berths—but are double-digit seeds—moan about not being moved ahead a few spots. This is annoying because teams seeded 10 through 12 are among the most blessed in the field.

First, they've made it to the tournament when they just as easily could have been left out. And more to the point, they've avoided the curse that afflicts teams in the 8th and 9th positions: a second-round game against one of the top four teams.

In the 13 tournaments since the field expanded to 64 teams in 1985, the winner of the 8 vs. 9 game has lost its second-rounder to the No. 1 seed 46 of 52 times. That is the very definition of hopelessness. And this year, it should be worse.

Not in recent memory has there been such a clear division between the top four teams and those beneath them. There has been a strong debate in each of the past three seasons about at least one top seed, but this time North Carolina, Duke, Kansas and Arizona have demonstrated they are without peer. Since January 1, they are a combined 48-3.

The trick to lasting awhile, then, is to avoid these guys as long as possible and perhaps get someone else to knock them off. The coach who says a bad draw doesn't matter "because you've got to play everyone sooner or later" is merely trying to sound brave. When Cincinnati reached the Final Four as a No. 4 seed in 1992, it beat no one higher than No. 5 Michigan State. No one apologized for that bit of good fortune.

With a few weeks left in the season, there is time for those that appear doomed to the 8-9 neighborhood to play their way out. The safest way for these teams to accomplish this is by climbing higher in the bracket, because to risk dropping lower is to risk dropping out altogether.

Illinois (18-8; RPI rank: 27). The Illini have made a rapid ascent toward the No. 5 or 6 range but could be hurt by a long layoff after their final regular-season game (February 24 at Indiana).

The front line of Jerry Hester, Jerrod Gee and Brian Johnson has been amazingly efficient; in a 7-1 stretch, they hit within a shot of 50 percent or better in every game but one.

This is a team that has momentum, and if that's lost, a first-round defeat in the Big Ten Tournament could boot them down the bracket.

Oklahoma State (18-4; RPI rank: 30). The Cowboys took a huge step when they completed a



sweep of rival Oklahoma. It was their fifth win against a tournament contender and helped lift them 10 RPI spots. When Oklahoma State controls the ball, it usually wins. In its past seven victories, it was plus-39 in turnover differential. Point guard Doug Gottlieb committed only 16 in those games, compared with 52 assists.

The Cowboys still have only a 3-2 record against the top 50. They face a road game this weekend against Kansas State and close at home March 1 against Kansas. A win in the first of those might be all that's necessary to advance to a No. 7. If they can defeat Kansas, it's not hard to imagine them wearing a No. 4.

Rhode Island (18-6; RPI rank: 34). Distinguishing between the teams chasing Massachusetts in the Atlantic 10 is kind of tough. Rhode Island, Temple, George Washington and Xavier have at least 16 wins and at least five defeats—and each has at least one conference road loss it would rather forget.

The Rams had a chance to separate themselves by sweeping Temple, but they fell a point short. Their key to success is attention to detail up front. When they have been even with or better than opponents on the boards, they have won all 10 games, and they are outrebounded by 15 per game in defeat. That bodes well for a crucial home game February 24 against Xavier, which is not overwhelming inside.

Marquette (16-6; RPI rank: 40). The mysterious foot ailment that limited star guard Aaron Hutchins to an average of 13 minutes in the Golden Eagles' first four February games left them a step short on offense and fighting not only to avoid a tough seed, but to make the tournament. Hutchins was 2-of-11 for five points in a critical home loss to UNC Charlotte. His last truly Hutch-like game was a career-best 32 points in an overtime win against Cincinnati last month.

The Golden Eagles' most critical game is February 25 at St. Louis, but none of their final games is easy. They may be only too happy to play Duke in the second round.

TSN

Mike DeCourcy covers college basketball for the Cincinnati Enquirer. E-mail him at decourcy@sportingnews.com.

Troubled Bruins

UCLA's Jelani McCoy tried to sound magnanimous in announcing his decision to leave the team. He cited "media scrutiny" as the reason for his departure, which means he had no good excuse, and said he did not want to be a distraction to his teammates.

McCoy, a 6-10 center, had been considered a potential lottery pick but ran into disciplinary problems before the season—reportedly as the result of a positive test for marijuana.

McCoy was bothered by his lack of playing time, and his presence appeared to be distracting to the Bruins, who opened 8-1 but were 11-4 after his return, including 2-2 in his final four games.

The Bruins are thin inside and reliant upon senior J.R. Henderson to be a full-time center but could become the cohesive group they were at the start of the season.

HOLDING PATTERN: Guard Matt Heldman and the Illini don't want to slip to a No. 8 or 9 seed.

TSN's Power Poll Women

Rk.	Team (last week)	W-L	Comment
1.	Tennessee (1)	28-0	Holdsclaw's 39 vs. Auburn pushes career total to 2,036.
2.	Connecticut (2)	24-2	Loss to Rutgers was one of those healthy learning experiences.
3.	Old Dominion (3)	21-2	Diaz out four weeks with broken tibia, may be back for NCAAs.
4.	Louisiana Tech (4)	20-3	Seven 100-point plus games most since 1988-89.
5.	Stanford (5)	15-5	Nygaard heats up: career-high 32 points vs. UCLA, 19 vs. USC.
6.	Texas Tech (7)	18-4	Thompson totals 120 points in last four games.
7.	North Carolina (6)	20-5	Virginia game a good tuneup for the tournament.
8.	Vanderbilt (10)	18-5	Play final three SEC games at home.
9.	Illinois (11)	17-6	Catchings had 13 steals in two games last week.
10.	Virginia (9)	17-7	Most conference losses (six) since 1989-90 season.
11.	NC State (12)	19-4	Freshman Tynesha Lewis averaging solid 11 ppg.
12.	Florida (8)	19-6	Page takes over NCAA rebounding lead with 13.1 per game.
13.	Arizona (13)	16-5	Pac-10's top defense created 41 turnovers by Arizona State.
14.	Duke (17)	18-6	Win on Sunday puts team percentage points ahead in ACC.
15.	Florida Int'l (14)	21-1	Could win 17th straight at home with win vs. Central Florida.
16.	S.F. Austin (16)	20-3	Only one loss—in OT—since falling to La. Tech in November.
17.	Alabama (25)	19-7	17-game home win streak ranks seventh in the nation.
18.	Clemson (18)	20-6	Have shot better than 40 percent on the road only twice.
19.	W. Kentucky (19)	19-7	115 points vs. Lamar is a season high.
20.	Washington (15)	16-6	Fell to an Oregon team that has climbed to No. 2 in Pac-10.
21.	Hawaii (20)	22-1	Unless team gets a tourney subregional, home schedule is done.
22.	Wisconsin (—)	18-8	Balanced attack: Five in double figures in win over Purdue.
23.	Utah (22)	19-3	Sweep of CSU puts Utah ½ game behind CSU in WAC Mountain.
24.	Iowa State (24)	20-5	Hitting an average of eight 3's a game, tops in the nation.
25.	Drake (—)	18-4	Hitting an average of 6.4 3's a game, 10th in the nation.

Dropped out: No. 23 Memphis (17-7).

The TSN Power Poll is determined by free-lance writer Michelle Smith, columnist Lori Riley and TSN editors. Records through Sunday.

TSN's Power Poll Men

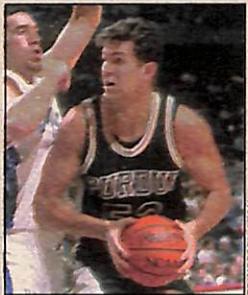
Rk.	Team (last week)	W-L	Comment
1.	North Carolina (1)	26-1	Field-goal percentage of 54.6 tops in this decade.
2.	Duke (2)	23-2	Dookies should bounce the Bruins.
3.	Arizona (3)	22-3	After a close call in Tempe, 'Cats hit the Oregon trail.
4.	Kansas (4)	27-3	Roy is in no Rush to recruit some players.
5.	Utah (5)	21-2	Utes top Colorado State for Majerus' 300th career victory.
6.	Connecticut (6)	22-4	Hamilton drops 31 on the Panthers.
7.	Purdue (8)	22-4	Three of last four on road, including season finale at Mich. St.
8.	New Mexico (10)	19-3	Lobos have won eight straight WAC games.
9.	Kentucky (7)	22-4	Mohammed flawless in second half of loss to Miss. 0-for-0.
10.	Stanford (12)	21-3	Young and Co. bounce back—they love L.A.
11.	Michigan State (13)	18-5	Tom Izzo in running for coach of the year.
12.	South Carolina (14)	19-4	Gamecocks like home cooking (12-0 at Frank McGuire Arena).
13.	UCLA (11)	19-5	McCoy's departure makes them a donut: nothing in the middle.
14.	West Virginia (15)	20-5	Greg Jones helps lead upset of UConn.
15.	Mississippi (24)	17-5	End four-game losing skid with first win at Kentucky since '27.
16.	Cincinnati (19)	19-5	We knew Cincy was physical, but eight T's in game vs. S. Fla.?
17.	Arkansas (9)	20-5	Alone atop SEC West despite two straight losses.
18.	Massachusetts (20)	19-6	Minutemen have won 13 of last 14 games.
19.	Princeton (17)	20-1	Tigers have won 23 straight Ivy League games.
20.	Texas Christian (22)	22-4	Eleven straight wins and still perfect in WAC Pacific.
21.	Maryland (18)	15-8	Rematch with Heels turns team into turtle soup.
22.	Michigan (23)	18-7	Bastion was expected back for Tuesday's big game vs. Mich. St.
23.	Xavier (21)	16-6	Hasn't lost back-to-back games in nearly two years.
24.	Temple (—)	16-6	Reserve Quincy Wadley helps Owls secure win against R.I.
25.	Syracuse (—)	19-5	Big day for Burgen (26 points, 10 rebounds) vs. W.Va.

Dropped out: No. 16 George Washington (20-5), No. 25 Rhode Island (18-6).

The TSN Power Poll is determined by columnist Mike DeCourcy and TSN editors. Records through last Sunday.

INSIDE THE TOP 25 Purdue

The first seven is virtually unchanged from last year. So where is all this offense coming from? Scoring is up 15 points a game, the 3-point shooting is over 40 percent and the FG mark is 50 percent with guard Chad Austin back on track. Add Brad Miller down low, the shooting of Jaraan Cornell, and Alan Eldridge stepping up at what was a predicted weakness—the point—and the inside-outside game is potent. The press has been a key, too. But when broken, Purdue is vulnerable. Frontcourt depth also is a concern.

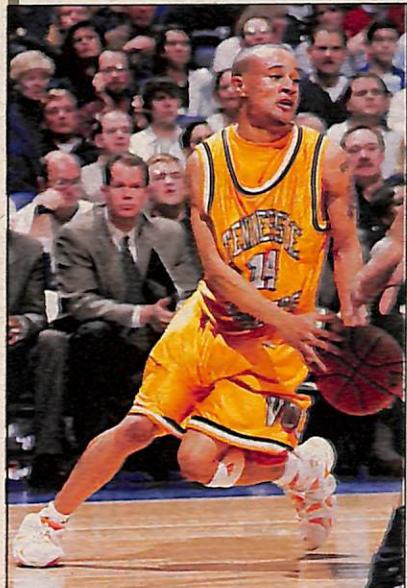


CENTERPIECE: Miller is a force in the paint.

inside dish

CAMPUS RUMBLINGS AND LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS

College fans who wonder if a possible NBA lockout or strike next season might keep some of the better underclassmen from entering the draft can forget it. Kansas junior **Paul Pierce** and Arizona sophomore **Mike Bibby** aren't saying they're heading to the pros, but they'll tell you the labor picture is not a factor. They will decide based on the usual variables: the lure of money vs. the pleasure of college life. ... **Mike Krzyzewski** is dismissing whispers that Duke freshman center **Elton Brand** might return from his foot injury by saying, "In my mind, he's not coming back." Which means it's not out of the question, but Coach K rightly doesn't want the distraction. ... Guard **Anthony Grundy** would be among the top unsigned prospects—except he can't get unsigned. He wants to be released from a letter-of-intent he signed with Bradley before heading to a military academy in Virginia, but Bradley



coach **Jim Molinari** hasn't budged. Louisville, Kentucky and Minnesota are among the point guard-hungry possibilities. ...

Although George Washington's **Mike Jarvis** is still on Michigan's list of potential head coaches, the top name remains Seton Hall's **Tommy Amaker**. ... When North Carolina's **Shammond Williams** bolted from the bench after being criticized for not fighting through Virginia's screens, assistant **Dave Hanners**

PASSING FANCY: Harris is learning the benefits of the assist.

wanted to talk with him, but coach **Bill Guthridge** pulled him back. Williams thinks he gets picked on more than the other Heels, an attitude that could disrupt a great team. ... Now that he has learned to pass more, Tennessee freshman point guard **Tony Harris** is thriving. He picked up more than a third of his assists during a six-game stretch in which the Vols won five to become an NCAA tourney contender. ... After first signing with Fresno State, **Kenny Brunner** escaped his letter-of-intent and headed to Georgetown. Now he has left the Hoyas and enrolled at Fresno in time to be eligible in December. He says he felt too much pressure to be a star and wasn't comfortable socially. ... Georgia Tech coach **Bobby Cremins** hates all the talk about whether freshman guard **Dion Glover** will go pro, saying, "It's really harmful." Every indication is Glover will enter the draft—despite a 27.4 3-point percentage.

TSN Free Agents

Basketball

Basketball Free Agents who can be claimed after 2 PM on Monday, Feb. 23rd, and before 9 PM on Sunday, March 1st, and be on your team for games beginning Monday, March 2nd.

PO ID	PLAYER / TEAM	SALARY
G 123	Eddie Jones, L.A. Lakers	\$2,770,000
G 142	Avery Johnson, San Antonio	\$2,220,000
F 305	Grant Hill, Detroit	\$3,530,000
F 371	Corliss Williamson, Sacramento	\$1,560,000
C 543	Cherokee Parks, Minnesota	\$810,000

Hockey

Hockey Free Agents who can be claimed after 9 AM on Friday, Feb. 27th, and before 9 PM on Thursday, March 5th, and be on your team for games beginning Friday, March 6th.

PO ID	PLAYER / TEAM	SALARY
G 42	Byron Dafoe, Boston	\$590,000
C 102	Ron Francis, Pittsburgh	\$2,660,000
W 433	Bill Guerin, Edmonton	\$1,640,000
W 473	Tie Domi, Toronto	\$1,180,000
D 808	Al MacInnis, St. Louis	\$1,390,000
D 846	Dave Karpa, Anaheim	\$850,000

TSN FANTASY CHALLENGE LEADERS IN THE RACE FOR THE CASH!

\$10,000 HOOPS CASH GRAND PRIZE LEADERS THRU 2/8

1	Senour/Allen	Glen Gardner, NJ
2	Kelly Schroeder	Columbus, NE
3	Marc Hewitt	St. Joseph, MI
4	Wycoff/Astor	Madison Heights, MI
5	Tom Dudman	Van Nuys, CA
6	Kelly Schroeder	Columbus, NE
7	Kelly Schroeder	Columbus, NE
8	Dan Manning	Indianola, IA
9	Keith Schoose	Long Beach, CA
10	Glenn Gutierrez	Winchester, MA

\$10,000 HOCKEY CASH GRAND PRIZE LEADERS THRU 2/5

1	Chris Reardon	Encinitas, CA
2	Longmore/Bailey	Columbia, MO
3	Krajn/Steinman	Port Huron, MI
4	Lacey/Brady	Bayside, NY
5	Francis Gagnon	Lachine, QUE
6	Doug Fitzer	Commerce, MI
7	Jason Haupt	Longlac, ONT
8	Michael Cascio	New Hyde Park, NY
9	Paul Bryant	Valley Stream, NY
10	Ray Szymanski	Pittsburgh, PA

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Insider

Fizzled frenzy

The style of play of Old Dominion point guard Ticha Penicheiro last season was upbeat, light-hearted, fancy-free. Fun to watch. An entertainer, her coach called her.

Many compared Penicheiro to Nancy Lieberman, and Penicheiro threw countless no-look passes and rushed her team helter-skelter up and down the court en route to the national title game. This season, although ODU still is ranked third and has lost only twice, has not been as much fun for the Kodak All-American.

With the loss of center Clarisse Machanguana to the ABL, it made sense to have Penicheiro fill at least some of the scoring gap (19.9 ppg) Machanguana left. But Penicheiro altered her game too much, and ODU's fast break took a major hit.

Two weeks ago, Old Dominion committed 27 turnovers in an 85-61 loss at No. 1-ranked Tennessee. Penicheiro, harassed by hyper freshman Semeka Randall for almost 40 minutes, made nine of them.

Whenever Penicheiro looked for passing lanes last season, they were there—even if nobody else saw them. Machanguana had played with Penicheiro for a number of years in Portugal and knew exactly when the no-lookers would zip to her. Although senior center Nyree Roberts is a solid post player, she's not Machanguana, who was more mobile.

"I miss Clarisse a lot," says Penicheiro, whose points (10.9 to 10.3) and assists (7.5 to 6.6) are down from last year. "She was a huge part of my game. I didn't think I would miss her as much."

Against Tennessee, Randall stole the ball from Penicheiro and made it look easy. Randall blocked one of her shots. She forced a turnover by poking the ball between her legs. At the end of the first half, ODU had a shot-clock violation. "It got to the point where I had to ask for a sub because I was really tired," Penicheiro says.

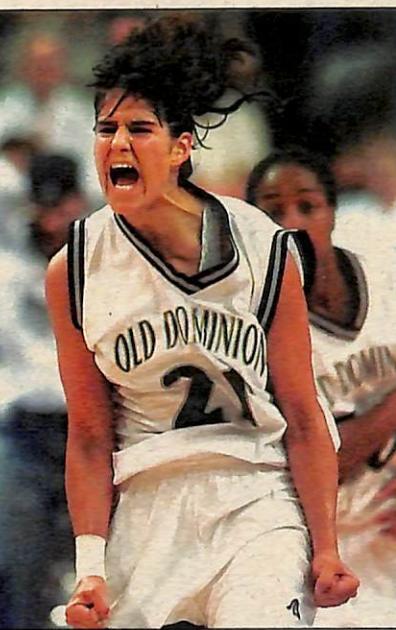
In early January, ODU coach Wendy Larry took some of the blame, saying she inadvertently put too much pressure on her to score. Penicheiro and Larry thought they had hashed things out. But she shot 3-for-15 against Tennessee.

Glimpses of the frenzy can still be seen. But, for the most part, it has disappeared.

Bejeweled Knights

Rutgers coach Vivian Stringer has been talking since she moved from Iowa to New Jersey in 1995. She proclaimed her new team the Jewel of the East. She talked about a national title. Then her first two teams went 13-15 and 11-17. Jokes circulated about the Zircon of the East.

But Stringer silenced critics last week when the Jewel handed No. 2 UConn a 74-70 loss. Rutgers (16-7 entering this week) made 7-of-16 3-pointers to hand



AMY SANCETTA/AP

FRUSTRATED AT THE POINT: Penicheiro isn't having much fun this season.

Games to watch

UCLA AT DUKE, 1:30 P.M. ET SUNDAY, ABC: Lack of an inside presence hurt Duke in this matchup last year, but UCLA center Jelani McCoy has struggled since a midseason return. With the game in Durham and senior guards Trajan Langdon and Steve Wojciechowski facing UCLA's freshmen backcourt, a repeat of last year isn't likely.

INDIANA AT MICHIGAN, 1 P.M. ET SUNDAY, CBS: A win could enhance a shot at a No. 4 or 5 NCAA seed for either team. Michigan's inside-outside punch of Louis Bullock and Robert Traylor is powerful, but the Hoosiers, led by A.J. Guyton and Luke Recker, are shooting 50 percent from the field.

GEORGIA AT SOUTH CAROLINA, 9:30 P.M. ET TUESDAY, ESPN: Georgia has much more talent than its record suggests and freshman forward Jumaine Jones is quickly establishing himself. The Gamecocks have a nasty habit of making almost every game a nail-biter—even at home.

Coaches corner:

WHAT TYPE OF TEAM IS MOST DIFFICULT TO PREPARE FOR?



**Carolyn Peck,
Purdue women:**

"1.) A team that's versatile and capable of playing four perimeter players. 2.) One that runs a non-structured motion offense. 3.) A very disciplined defensive team."



**Kevin Stallings,
Illinois State:**

"One that is significantly different than us in terms of size or athleticism. Those things can be difficult to simulate in practice. Also, a team that plays an unusual type of defense or offense (i.e. Temple's matchup zone defense) can make it much more difficult."



**Bob Huggins,
Cincinnati:**

"We never approach a game with the idea that this team is hard to prepare for because they do this or that. We like to see many different styles. This makes us better in March."

NCAA Leaders

MEN

Individual

Scoring

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	FG	3FG	FT	Pts.	Avg.
1.	Charles Jones, Long Island	SR	21	223	80	73	599	28.5
2.	Lee Nailon, Texas Christian	JR	23	250	0	93	593	25.8
3.	Brett Eppheimer, Lehigh	JR	23	165	78	166	574	25.0
4.	Mike Powell, Loyola (Md.)	SR	22	163	36	173	535	24.3
5.	Earl Boykins, E. Michigan	SR	20	171	57	82	481	24.0
6.	Cory Carr, Texas Tech	SR	20	160	47	112	479	24.0
7.	Bonzi Wells, Ball State	SR	21	181	39	98	500	23.8
8.	Antawn Jamison, N. Carolina	JR	24	208	4	137	557	23.2
9.	Pat Garrity, Notre Dame	SR	20	158	23	109	448	22.4
10.	Evan Eschmeyer, N'western	SR	20	154	0	138	446	22.3
11.	Mike Jones, Texas Christian	SR	24	199	45	92	535	22.3
12.	Saddi Washington, W. Mich.	SR	21	155	46	109	465	22.1
13.	Matt Harpring, Georgia Tech	SR	22	165	32	125	487	22.1
14.	Antoine Brockington, Coppin	SR	20	145	57	95	442	22.1
15.	Xavier Singletary, Howard	SO	17	114	51	94	373	21.9

Rebounding

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	No.	Avg.
1.	Nick Davis, Arkansas	SR	23	274	11.9
2.	Eric Taylor, St. Francis (Pa.)	SR	23	273	11.9
3.	Ryan Perryman, Dayton	SR	23	271	11.8
4.	Evan Eschmeyer, Northwestern	SR	20	226	11.3
5.	Allen Ledbetter, Maine	JR	22	248	11.3
6.	Thad Burton, Wright State	SR	22	248	11.3
7.	T.J. Lux, Northern Illinois	JR	21	229	10.9
8.	K'zell Wesson, La Salle	JR	21	228	10.9
9.	Jerome James, Florida A&M	SR	20	216	10.8
10.	Rahshon Turner, Fairleigh Dickinson	SR	21	224	10.7
11.	Michael Olowokandi, Pacific	SR	23	244	10.6
12.	Kenyon Ross, Mississippi Valley State	SR	22	233	10.6
13.	Tremaine Fowlkes, Fresno State	JR	19	197	10.4
14.	Todd MacCulloch, Washington	JR	20	206	10.3
15.	Carlos Daniel, Washington State	SR	22	224	10.2

Field-goal percentage

Rk.	Name, School	Cl.	G	FG	FGA	Pct.
1.	Todd MacCulloch, Washington	JR	20	162	242	66.9
2.	Ryan Moss, Arkansas-Little Rock	JR	21	128	192	66.7
3.	Zoran Viskovic, Valparaiso	JR	23	123	188	65.4
4.	Brad Miller, Purdue	SR	22	113	174	64.9
5.	Brian Miles, San Diego	SR	22	130	201	64.7
6.	Leon Watson, Texas-San Antonio	SO	21	123	193	63.7
7.	Evan Eschmeyer, Northwestern	SR	20	154	244	63.1
8.	Nate Holmstadt, Montana State	JR	23	148	235	63.0
9.	Kareem Livingston, Appalachian State	SR	21	107	170	62.9
10.	Alexander Koul, George Washington	SR	23	121	194	62.4

3-point field-goal percentage

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	3FG	3FGA	Pct.
1.	Jim Cantamessa, Siena	SO	21	50	84	59.5
2.	Coby Turner, Dayton	JR	23	41	70	58.6
3.	Mike Beam, Harvard	JR	18	31	54	57.4
4.	Matt Langel, Pennsylvania	SO	17	27	48	56.3
5.	Kenyan Weaks, Florida	SO	17	44	79	55.7
6.	Justin Jones, Utah State	SR	23	41	76	53.9
7.	Greg Stolt, Florida	JR	20	43	84	51.2
8.	Jaraan Cornell, Purdue	SO	24	58	115	50.4
9.	Mark Poag, Old Dominion	JR	21	69	139	49.6
10.	Royce Olney, New Mexico	SR	21	65	131	49.6

Free-throw percentage

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	FT	FTA	Pct.
1.	Pete Lisicky, Penn State	SR	20	62	66	93.9
2.	Danny Sprinkle, Montana State	JR	22	57	61	93.4
3.	Matt Sundblad, Lamar	JR	19	76	82	92.7
4.	Clifton Ellis, SW Texas	JR	21	61	66	92.4
5.	Louis Bullock, Michigan	JR	24	83	90	92.2
6.	Levell Sanders, Seton Hall	SR	19	50	55	90.9
7.	Trajan Langdon, Duke	JR	23	69	76	90.8
8.	Matthew Graves, Butler	SR	22	56	62	90.3
9.	Cory Carr, Texas Tech	SR	20	112	124	90.3
10.	Kevin Ault, SW Missouri	SO	24	71	79	89.9

Assists

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	No.	Avg.
1.	Ahlon Lewis, Arizona State	SR	24	221	9.2
2.	Ed Cota, North Carolina	SO	24	191	8.0
3.	Rafer Alston, Fresno State	JR	20	157	7.8
4.	Vince Carter, Hawaii	SR	19	149	7.8
5.	Chico Fletcher, Arkansas State	SO	23	180	7.8
6.	Mateen Cleaves, Michigan State	SO	21	161	7.7



Kenyan Weaks (top) and Greg Stolt are shooting better than 51 percent from 3-point range, helping Florida lead the nation in 3-point goals per game (10.5).

Steals

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	No.	Avg.
1.	Juan Sanchez, Temple	SO	17	68	4.0
2.	Bonzi Wells, Ball State	SR	21	77	3.7
3.	Damian Owens, West Virginia	SR	23	78	3.4
4.	Jason Rowe, Loyola (Md.)	SO	22	74	3.4
5.	Willie Coleman, DePaul	JR	23	75	3.3
6.	J.R. Camel, Montana	JR	25	81	3.2
7.	Roderick Blakney, South Carolina St.	SR	20	64	3.1
8.	Charles Jones, Long Island	SR	21	66	3.1
9.	LaRon Profit, Maryland	JR	21	66	3.1
10.	Mike Jones, Texas Christian	SR	24	75	3.1

Blocks

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	No.	Avg.
1.	Jerome James, Florida A&M	SR	20	103	5.2
2.	Alvin Jones, Georgia Tech	FR	23	104	4.5
3.	Calvin Booth, Penn State	JR	20	85	4.3
4.	Etan Thomas, Syracuse	SO	22	84	3.8
5.	Tarvis Williams, Hampton	SO	19	67	3.5
6.	Brian Skinner, Baylor	SR	20	69	3.5
7.	Caswell Cyrus, St. Bonaventure	SO	23	77	3.3
8.	Avondre Jones, Fresno State	SR	17	56	3.3
9.	Michael Olowokandi, Pacific	SR	23	64	2.8
10.	Kirill Misyuchenko, Citadel	SR	21	58	2.8

Field-goal percentage

Rk.	Name, School	Cl.	G	FG	FGA	Pct.
1.	Barbara Farris, Tulane	SR	22	116	162	71.6
2.	Myndee Larsen, Southern Utah	SR	21	127	247	69.6
3.	Sharon Mitchell, Georgia Southern	SO	23	135	199	67.8
4.	Tammi Blackstone, Drake	SO	20	111	167	66.5
5.	Tamika Whitmore, Memphis	JR	21	220	345	63.8

Assists

Rk.	Name, school	Cl.	G	No.	Avg.
1.	Dalma Ivanyi, Florida International	JR	20	199	9.9
2.	Alli Bills, Utah	SR	20	159	7.9
3.	Nicki Taggart, Marquette	SR	23	177	7.7
4.	Gina Graziani, Miami (Fla.)	SO	21	161	7.7
5.	Lisa Witherspoon, Virginia Tech	JR	21	149	7.1

TECH TWO-STEP

With Louisiana Tech's win against New Orleans February 11, not only did the Lady Techsters extend the nation's top current NCAA home winning streak to 46 games, but their streak broke into the all-time top 10.

All-time home women's NCAA* winning streaks

Rk.	Team	Wins	Streak
1.	Tennessee	69	Feb. 1991-Jan. 1996
2.	Auburn	68	Feb. 1986-Nov. 1991
3.	Louisiana Tech	62	Dec. 1982-Feb. 1986
4.	Virginia	61	Jan. 1992-Dec. 1995
5.	Colorado	53	Feb. 1980-Nov. 1983
6.	Rutgers	53	Feb. 1985-Dec. 1988
7.	Rutgers	49	Dec. 1977-Jan. 1982
8.	Louisiana Tech	49	Nov. 1978-Dec. 1982
9.	Stanford	49	Nov. 1994-Nov. 1997
10.	Iowa	46	Dec. 1986-Jan. 1990
11.	Louisiana Tech	46	March 1995-present

*The NCAA began keeping official women's basketball statistics and held its first championship game in the 1981-82 season.



EASY AS 1, 2, 3: LaQuan Stallworth in streak No. 3.

MICHAEL DUNLAP/AP

WOMEN

Team

Scoring offense

MO VAUGHN will remain the linchpin for the Red Sox if he can get

his personal

Mo Vaughn's world turned upside down. His Ford pickup rammed an abandoned car in a breakdown lane of I-95 between Providence and Boston. The truck flipped, concrete bit into metal and Vaughn found himself suspended by a sturdy seat belt, staring up at his shoes. gingerly, he released himself, crawled out the passenger window and surveyed the mayhem. Vaughn saw his truck had lost its hood, and the cab was crushed. The car he hit was demolished. He took a deep breath. No blood. No broken bones. He had survived a brush with death or infirmity. Now he would have to survive scrutiny into his bachelor lifestyle, drinking habits, ponderous weight and ability to lead the Red Sox.

As camp opens this week at Fort Myers, Fla., Vaughn, 30, will be even more of a focal point than usual. He is swinging his thick bat by the grace of God and a seat belt.

"Somebody is watching over my son," Vaughn's father, Leroy, says.

But Red Sox Nation wonders if its amiable first baseman is watching over himself. In his contract year, he and the club are at a moment of reckoning. How much is he worth and for how long? In Vaughn's upside-down world, those questions

are not easily answered.

Vaughn's second life began January 9, the night he frightened New England out of its wits and sent up a flag as red as the lettering on his uniform. It wasn't only that while returning at 2 a.m. from a strip joint in Providence he crashed, failed on-scene sobriety tests and was arrested for drunken driving. It was more the emergence of a pattern. In 1995, he brawled at a Boston nightclub and missed a couple of games. Last summer, an Ohio man said Vaughn assaulted him outside a Cleveland strip joint, although prosecutors did not bring charges. Regular gossip-column sightings at the Foxy Lady, a swank Providence strip club, with accounts of \$100 bills being stuffed into G strings, fill in the gaps.

Local talk radio is buzzing with speculation about Vaughn, while beat writers, accustomed to seeing Vaughn sip scotch from a plastic cup after games, are wondering.

Vaughn declined to be interviewed, but his agent, Tom Reich, flatly denies a problem. "While Mo clearly likes interacting with his peers, etc., to the question does Mo have a problem, my answer is, unequivocally, no," Reich says.

Leroy Vaughn is cryptic. "Nobody knows the facts," he says. "Until we know the facts, it's between The Man Upstairs and Mo." Leroy adds, "Sometimes you get an omen, and you have to deal with it."

Meanwhile, Vaughn's friends are concerned. Rico Petrocelli, a former Red Sox infielder, managed Vaughn at Class AAA Pawtucket in 1991. He is not currently employed by the Red Sox, nor does he have a business relationship with Vaughn.

"Knowing Mo, because I like him a

lot, the night life is my biggest concern," Petrocelli says. "What he has done is a pattern. He has every right to go out and drink alcohol, but he has to stay away from these problems.

"He's got a responsibility to the Red Sox and his own family and the kids he works with. Responsibility means ... if there is any kind of problem and pattern, he needs to take care of it. Get help. That is my feeling. I'm not saying there is a problem, but if there is, he has to take care of it."

Little about the nocturnal habits of baseball players is new since the time of Babe Ruth, a legendary carouser linked to Vaughn through Red Sox genealogy, outgoing personality, expansive belly and the fraternity of southpaw sluggers.

Indeed, biographer Robert W. Creamer's description of Ruth at midcareer is quaintly suggestive of Vaughn: "Early in 1925 he left New York for Hot Springs for his traditional prespring training camp. He was fat. In January he weighed 256. In Hot Springs he played a little golf, jogged a little, took hot steam baths. But he also drank and ran around town with women and stayed up all night and ate like a hog. He was always on the go."

If only Vaughn's life were as simple. He parallels Ruth, and then he is somebody more modern and complex. Until his drunken-driving arrest, he was the most popular black athlete in Boston's checkered racial history, admired by fans of all colors. His popularity was built on community and clubhouse leadership.

Vaughn is an urban preacher who exhorts youth to follow the straight and narrow. He was a youth advocate



before he became a star, and he maintained his ad hoc ministry after winning the 1995 MVP and landing a three-year, \$18 million contract. He runs a youth-development program in Boston's poorest neighborhood and appears at clinics, fund-raisers and charity events in white as well as minority neighborhoods.

In uniform, Vaughn is the club's ombudsman. A year ago, he was an angry critic of general manager Dan Duquette for allowing icon Roger Clemens to depart to the Blue Jays. His opinions usually reflect his low frustration level with what heretofore has been the club's refusal to spend at a competitive level. Most fans appreciate his dogged advocacy for a contending club. Now Vaughn is damaged in both areas. It's going to be hard to deliver his "stay clean" message when a youth in the audience shouts, "Look in the mirror, Mo."

It's also going to be easier for Duquette to trade Vaughn, if a contract can't be resolved. *Boston Herald* columnist Karen Guregan writes, "(Vaughn) doesn't have the kind of fanatical fan backing he once enjoyed. His support has waned ... (Vaughn's arrest) pretty much stripped him of the hold he had on Duquette. Whether or not he is proven guilty ... it doesn't matter. Things have changed. Duquette now has the upper hand when it comes to Vaughn."

The Yankees, Orioles and Dodgers have shown interest in Vaughn in the past year. The Yankees considered trading center fielder Bernie Williams, a deal Duquette relished because Williams has a terrific glove and Vaughn led A.L. first basemen in errors (14). The Orioles were dangling Rafael Palmeiro, the Dodgers Eric Karros and a pitcher.

Duquette is rehabilitating his image after the loss of Clemens and a two-year nosedive following the 1995 A.L. East championship. He has softened his spiked hair and crawled out



SIGN OR DEAL?

Duquette will have a decision to make.

MO-MENTUM:
It's no stretch to say Vaughn's performance this season could put Boston over the top.

ROBERT SEALE/TSN

life in order—and a long-term contract behind him **By Steve Marantz**

BASEBALL

IN THE MIRROR



of his media bunker. His acquisition and \$75 million signing of N.L. Cy Young winner Pedro Martinez rocked New England to its Calvinist roots. Signings of infielder John Valentin and pitchers Tim Wakefield and Tom Gordon, plus the acquisitions of catcher Jim Leyritz and reliever Dennis Eckersley, increased optimism. If Rookie of the Year Nomar Garciaparra improves even a little, he will be frightening. Righthanded starting prospect Brian Rose, 22, is ready. Fans are hopeful.

Club officials no longer speak of Boston as a "medium market." CEO John Harrington says the payroll will climb to \$50 million this season and could go to a championship-caliber \$70 million in 1999. Ticket prices rose from an average of \$17.69 to \$20.65, among baseball's highest.

Payroll must increase to compete with the Yankees, who are improved with Chuck Knoblauch at second base and Chili Davis as DH. The Orioles

may have slipped a bit, losing closer Randy Myers to the Blue Jays and adding only aging Joe Carter as a righthanded DH. However, a return to health by Roberto Alomar and Brady Anderson could lift the club. The Jays might contend, with Myers closing, Jose Cruz Jr. a year older and Tony Fernandez and Jose Canseco adding offense.

Vaughn is Boston's linchpin, yet the two sides are far apart, with Vaughn asking for four to

five years at \$10 million per and Duquette offering two to three years at \$8.5 million to \$9 million, on par with deals signed by Mark McGwire and Andres Galarraga. Vaughn's three-year numbers are elite: .314, 118 home runs, 365 RBIs.

Over the same period, only Galarraga, Albert Belle, Frank Thomas, Dante Bichette, Tino Martinez and Jay Buhner have more RBIs, and only McGwire, Belle, Galarraga, Buhner and Ken Griffey Jr. have more home runs. Vaughn's three-year slugging percentage of .573 is topped only by McGwire, Thomas, Belle, Griffey, Larry Walker,

Juan Gonzalez, Mike Piazza, Barry Bonds, Edgar Martinez and Ellis Burks.

But numbers don't fully explain Vaughn's presence. Last July, Mariners lefthander Randy Johnson toed a five-game winning streak into Fenway. Johnson and Vaughn are territorial about the plate. On Vaughn's first at-bat, he took a fastball in the arm. Second time up, Vaughn bounced a single through the left side. Third at-bat, he lined a two-run home run into the center field bleachers. Boston won, 4-0.

Duquette knows Martinez could be wasted without a bona fide cleanup hitter. He knows Vaughn remains a public-relations force, albeit tarnished.

Against these factors Duquette projects Vaughn's longevity. How many good years remain, considering his age (30), body type and lifestyle? Last June, Vaughn's left knee required an arthroscopic cleanup. He rushed his recovery and returned heavier. As his production dropped, his weight attracted attention.

Estimates of Vaughn's weight vary. His optimum playing weight is said to be 235, while his Ruthian weight could be as high as 280.

In Duquette's cold calculation, Vaughn's knee surgery may foreshadow a physical decline, aided and abetted by late nights, drinking and a weight problem.

Duquette declined to be interviewed, citing the delicacy of negotiations. But at a January media event he said: "All players who reach 30 have to make an adjustment. Those players have to watch their diet and put more emphasis on conditioning."

The remark, after Valentin's \$26 million signing to a four-year deal with an option for a fifth, should have caught Vaughn's attention.

Valentin is 10 months older than Vaughn.

Trainer Mackie Shilstone works with players of Vaughn's body type. Although Shilstone does not train Vaughn, among his clients is former NL MVP Kevin Mitchell, who, at 5-11, 240 pounds, is built similarly and whose career has been dogged by weight problems.

"In baseball, we find that the bigger guys with big guts tend to have more deviation in spinal curvature," says Shilstone, clinical director of the LSU Center for Sports Performance Fitness and Wellness. "It causes tightening of the hamstrings and (a wearing

and tearing under) the kneecap." The antidote, Shilstone says, is weight reduction, strengthening of abdominal muscles and hamstring stretches.

In 1996, Duquette signed Mitchell, then 34, but he spent most of a half-season on the disabled list before being traded. In Vaughn, Duquette may see the lame ghost of Mitchell.

Leroy Vaughn acknowledges baseball executives are branding Mo with a scarlet "F" for fat. The label annoys him. He likens his son to Kirby Puckett, whose stocky build never was an issue.

After the accident, Vaughn passed a physical and retreated to his gated estate in Easton, Mass. He brooded for a few days, dismayed by a public reaction characterized as "disappointment without anger" by a local talk radio host. Then, Vaughn took an unusual step of placing an ad in Boston's two largest newspapers. In the ad, he cited the "serious nature" of the crash, acknowledged his regret and vowed to continue his community work.

One sentence stood out as an extraordinary window to his psyche: *"I realize that I am considered a role model and not a saint."*

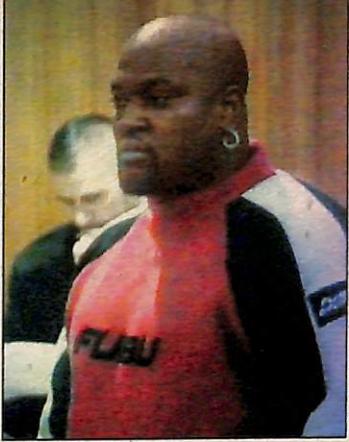
Revealed is another "weight" problem, less visible but perhaps more telling. If Vaughn believes fans are expecting a "saint" for a cleanup hitter, then it may explain why the Foxy Lady is his entertainment of choice. If he felt sainted, then it was not entirely his fault. For years, the club and fans leaned on him to ease their racial anxiety.

His parents, retired career educators with exacting religious and community-service ideals, hold him to a high standard. The ad's sub-text is: "Ease off. I'm just a man." Even that is a stretch.

"He's a 30-year-old kid, not a hard 30-year-old man," Leroy Vaughn says. "When he's challenged, he's still got to go out and do it. After he homered off Randy Johnson, he was excited. He said to me, 'Daddy, only a few lefthanded hitters play against him. Only a few have hit home runs.'"

Vaughn left for Florida on February 1, in Ruthian fashion, to get an early start. Before leaving, he gave his first interview since the accident, acknowledged concerns about his weight, and vowed, "I'll be ready opening day."

Vaughn's enthusiasm for the game is youthful and contagious. Try to remember that come March 2, when he goes to trial for drunken driving. It promises to be an unpleasant moment for New England. If Vaughn is convicted, then there will be guilt enough to go around. But only one person will lose his driver's license and go on probation. And only one person will be challenged to prove himself, on opening day, and night. **TSN**



ROCK BOTTOM: Local TV captured Vaughn on January 9 at his arraignment on drunken driving charges.

Heavy lumber

The cumulative three-season totals (1995 through '97) of home runs, RBIs and slugging percentage for some of the game's top power-hitting first basemen:

	Slug.	HR	RBI	pct.
Andres Galarraga	119	396	.567	
Tino Martinez	100	369	.530	
Mark McGwire	149	326	.684	
Frank Thomas	115	370	.615	
Mo Vaughn	118	365	.573	

Source: STATS, Inc.

this week online

Another facelift for TSN

The best and most decorated sports site on America Online just got better. The Sporting News (keyword: TSN) has a whole new look. TSN, winner of the AOL Members' Choice Award a record three times, is more colorful, interactive and functional than ever.

America Online—it's so easy to use, no wonder it's No. 1. To order AOL software, call 1-800-4-ONLINE.

www.sportingnews.com AOL keyword: TSN



Insider

Peter Schmuck

The L.A. dilemma: Is it time to break up the Dodgers?

Here's the predicament: You have a high-profile team in a huge metropolitan area and you have spent liberally to keep it stocked with expensive players. Now, you face the prospect of handing out the biggest single contract in baseball history and you can't say for sure whether you can expect a reasonable return on that investment. What do you do?

That is the Dodgers' dilemma. The club is a perennial pennant contender with a stable of popular stars that missed the playoffs last year and fell flat in the post-season each of the previous two seasons. Now, they face the prospect of handing catcher Mike Piazza a multiyear contract, which—by some estimates—could be worth close to \$100 million. Does that make sense?

It is a difficult question, because there may not be a right answer.

The Dodgers are one of the coveted organizations in baseball, as evidenced by the estimated \$350 million that media mogul Rupert Murdoch has offered to pay for the franchise. They play in front of a faithful fan following that has come to expect a competitive club every year and has grown comfortable with a strong nucleus of young stars that includes Piazza, Eric Karros and Raul Mondesi.

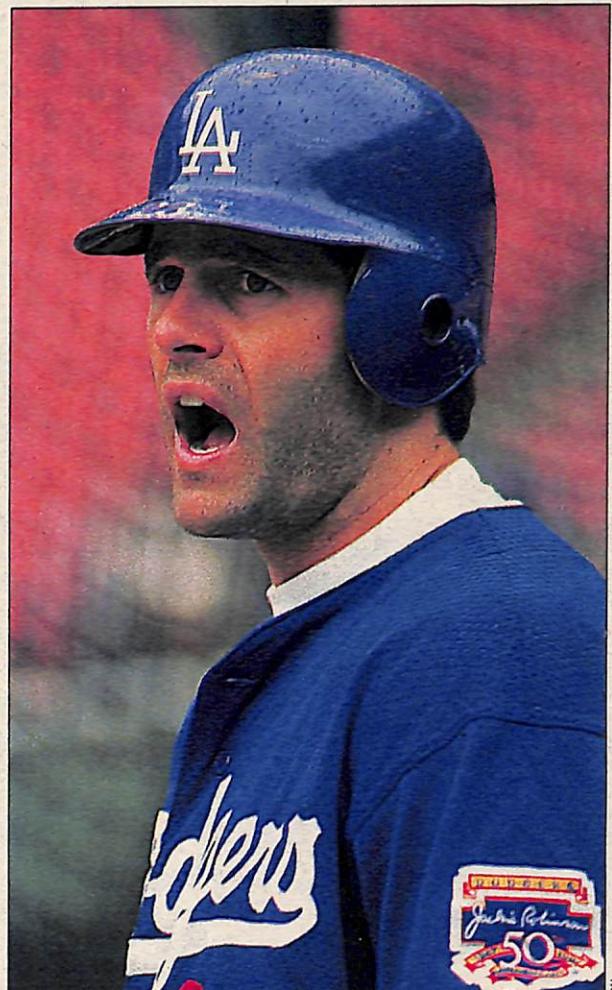
Every year, as those players continue to mature, the cost of fielding that team goes up, as it did recently when the club signed Mondesi to a guaranteed four-year contract worth \$36 million and two option years worth another \$24 million. But it is essentially the same team that has been criticized for lacking the killer instinct to win a game in either of its last two playoff appearances.

Don't misunderstand. This is not an indictment of Piazza, who will be the most sought-after free agent on the market next November if the Dodgers don't re-sign him before then. Based on the factors that determine value in baseball, Piazza deserves to be the highest-paid player in the game.

The most important of those factors makes it almost a no-brainer, since the Red Sox recently handed pitcher Pedro Martinez a six-year contract worth \$75 million. Martinez is not the best player at his position, but the Red Sox felt they had to lock him up long term because they had given up top pitching prospect Carl Pavano to acquire Martinez from the Expos.

Piazza clearly is the best player at his position. He is a front-line catcher who also happens to be one of the best all-around offensive players in the game. Piazza is coming off a string of outstanding seasons, which separates him from Martinez, who had never won more than 14 games before last year.

The official position of the Dodgers' front office



ON THE TRADING BLOCK? In order to play Konerko, the Dodgers might have to ship Karros off to another team.

Comeback kid

Darryl Strawberry seems intent on making a big impression this spring. He spent the winter rehabilitating his injured knee and getting into—by some accounts—great shape for one last run at the Yankees starting lineup.

Strawberry may be a long shot to play in 130 games this year, but he apparently is going to get a long look from manager Joe Torre, who would love to have the Darryl of old patrolling left field and hitting baseballs into the stratosphere.

The competition is going to be fierce, with fellow veteran Tim Raines, Chad Curtis and up-and-comer Ricky Ledee competing for at least a portion of the playing time.

is that the club will do everything within reason to keep Piazza in Los Angeles, but it is not entirely illogical to ask whether the club might be better off spending that \$100 million to improve in other areas.

The club ranked seventh in the league in runs scored (742) last season, and that was with Piazza, Mondesi and Karros all having outstanding seasons. Is it reasonable, then, to spend all that money to entrench what has been only a marginal playoff team?

There is no easy answer, but the Dodgers have been given an opportunity—by Piazza and his agent—to weigh the question carefully.

It is a relatively young team, with five N.L. Rookie of the Year winners on the roster, but there is more talent backing up in the minor league system.

First base prospect Paul Konerko soon will be ready for prime time, but Karros is locked up through the 2000 season unless the organization decides to package him in a deal for another premier pitcher. That doesn't seem likely—Karros is a proven commodity who has had at least 30 homers and 100 RBIs in each of the last three seasons—but rumors persist that the organization is ready to turn first base over to Konerko.

Money should not be a major issue. The Dodgers payroll was \$48 million last year, well below the top-salaried teams in New York, Baltimore and Atlanta, but owner Peter O'Malley apparently has been reluctant to run it up while the sale of the club to Murdoch remains in limbo.

The sale probably will be approved when baseball owners hold their quarterly meeting March 17-19 in Florida, putting final authority over the club's future in new hands, but News Corp. has given no indication that the front-office hierarchy will be altered any time soon.

O'Malley probably will remain—at least temporarily—president of the club and Fred Claire hopes to stay on indefinitely as general manager. They are the chief architects of the team that will take the field on opening day, so there is no reason to believe those two would do anything dramatic to reconfigure the roster for the 1998 season.

What happens after this year, however, is anybody's guess.

TSN

Peter Schmuck covers baseball for the Baltimore Sun. E-Mail him at schmuck@sportingnews.com.



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2nd	\$15,000	\$750	\$250
3rd	\$10,000	\$500	\$100
4th	\$5,000	\$250	\$75
5th	\$2,000	\$150	\$50
6th to 10th	\$1,000	\$100	
11th to 25th	\$250	\$50	
26th to 100th	\$100		

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CATCHERS												OUTFIELDERS												RELIEF PITCHERS											
ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.	ID#	Player	Team	Sal.				
4928	Plazza, Mike	LA	1580	5308	Veras, Quiilio	SD	730	5732	Jackson, Damian	Mil	350	5761	Abbott, Jeff	CHA	580	4355	Tapani, Kevin	CHN	840	5820	Perisich, Matt	Tex	350	5194	Spoljaric, Paul	Sea	800	5194	Spoljaric, Paul	Sea	800				
4680	Rodriguez, Ivan	Tex	1370	5158	Womack, Tony	Pit	710	4542	Offerman, Jose	KC	680	5666	Relaford, Desi	Phi	350	5497	Garcia, Karim	Ari	570	4790	Jenner, Jeff	Mil	840	5449	Irschinghausen, Jason	NYN	350	5284	Frascatore, John	StL	790				
5562	Kendall, Jason	Pit	870	4542	Offerman, Jose	KC	680	5666	Relaford, Desi	Phi	350	5904	Encarnacion, Juan	CHN	550	4952	Navarro, Jaime	CHA	830	5833	Brock, Charlie	AtL	350	5379	Buchheit, Doug	Oak	790								
4965	Lopez, Javier	AtL	840	5738	Spiezio, Scott	Oak	670	4733	Gagne, Greg	LA	560	5904	Brown, Brant	CHN	550	4952	Rekar, Bryan	TB	350	5569	Holt, Mike	Ana	770	5569	Holt, Mike	Ana	770								
4294	Alomar, Sandy	Cle	830	5709	Guerrero, Wilson	LA	620	4728	Walter, Larry	Col	3080	3217	Daulton, Darren	Fla	550	4675	Kamienicki, Scott	Bal	820	5545	Craig, Doug	Chi	350	5068	Leskanic, Curt	Col	790								
4482	Hundley, Todd	NYN	720	4881	Frye, Jeff	Bos	600	4181	Griffey, Ken	Sea	2740	5665	Ibañez, Raul	Sea	540	4130	Barwin, Danny	SF	820	4413	Greens, Tommy	Hou	350	4867	Petkovic, Mark	StL	730								
5897	Marrero, Eric	StL	720	4609	Garcia, Carlos	Tor	580	4305	Griffey, Ken	SF	2320	5301	Hollandsworth, Todd	LA	540	4796	Eldred, Cal	Mil	800	5459	Irschinghausen, Jason	NYN	350	5284	Frascatore, John	StL	790								
5521	Sweeney, Mike	KC	660	5676	Castillo, Luis	Fla	570	3918	Bonds, Barry	Col	2240	5628	Glanville, Doug	Phi	530	5632	Navarro, Jaime	CHA	830	5833	Brock, Charlie	AtL	350	5379	Buchheit, Doug	Oak	790								
4927	Wilson, Dan	Sea	630	3001	Franco, Julio	Mil	530	4159	Bichette, Dantes	Col	2010	5417	Mouton, Lyle	CHA	530	4516	Rekar, Bryan	TB	350	5569	Rekar, Bryan	AtL	350	5379	Rekar, Bryan	AtL	350								
5556	Greene, Todd	Ana	630	5191	Lockhart, Keith	AtL	530	4362	Belle, Albert	CHA	1960	5826	McDonald, Jason	Oak	530	4323	Gardner, Mark	SF	790	5861	Hernandez, Xavier	Tex	350	5436	Hernandez, Xavier	Tex	350								
4315	Hollis, Chris	Bal	580	5504	Loretta, Mark	Mil	530	4691	Williams, Bernie	NYA	1960	5826	Portugal, Mark	Phi	530	5644	D'Amico, Jeff	Mil	790	5466	Guardado, Eddie	Min	670	5466	Guardado, Eddie	Min	670								
4344	Widger, Chris	Mon	550	4556	Morandini, Mickey	Chi	520	4268	Sheffield, Gary	Fla	1960	5813	Brown, Adrián	Bal	550	4675	Kamienicki, Scott	Bal	820	5545	Craig, Doug	Chi	350	5068	Leskanic, Curt	Col	790								
3857	Steinbach, Terry	Min	5140	4917	Boone, Bret	Cin	510	5094	Mondesi, Raul	LA	1930	5791	Traverso, Tony	Fla	550	2201	Barwin, Danny	SF	820	4413	Greens, Tommy	Hou	350	4867	Petkovic, Mark	StL	730								
4904	Pratt, Todd	NYN	530	5148	Abbott, Kurt	Fla	480	4547	Landford, Ray	StL	1890	3126	Daulton, Darren	Fla	550	2201	Barwin, Danny	SF	820	3131	Sturtz, Taryn	Tex	350	4979	Mohler, Mike	Oak	790								
4482	Reylin, Jim	Bos	500	3704	McLemore, Mark	Tex	460	5132	Ramirez, Manny	Col	1890	5665	Ibañez, Raul	Sea	540	4130	Leiter, Al	Fla	820	5545	Wojciechowski, Steve	Oak	350	5057	Wendell, Turk	NYN	350								
5897	Marrero, Eric	StL	720	4609	Garcia, Carlos	Tor	580	4305	Griffey, Ken	Sea	2740	5665	Hollandsworth, Todd	LA	540	4796	Eldred, Cal	Mil	800	5459	Wojciechowski, Steve	Oak	350	5057	Wendell, Turk	NYN	350								
4430	Fletcher, Darrin	Tor	490	4190	Alicia, Luis	Tex	450	4918	Salmon, Tim	Ana	1790	4546	Planter, Phil	StL	500	4441	Brede, Ari	Fla	820	4473	Shaff, Jeff	SD	210	5202	Shaff, Jeff	SD	210								
5427	Reylin, Jim	Bos	480	5031	Cedeno, Domingo	Col	370	5126	White, Rondell	Mil	1740	5726	Dunn, Todd	Phi	530	5632	Rosado, Jose	KC	800	5459	McAndrew, Jamie	Mil	350	5307	McAndrew, Jamie	Mil	350								
5556	Greene, Todd	Ana	630	5191	Lockhart, Keith	AtL	530	4362	Belle, Albert	CHA	2010	5417	Mouton, Lyle	CHA	530	4516	Leiter, Mark	Phi	800	5860	Bowers, Shane	Min	700	4958	Embree, Alan	AtL	700								
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4430	Fletcher, Darrin	Tor	490	4190	Alicia, Luis	Tex	450	4918	Salmon, Tim	Ana	1790	4546	Planter, Phil	StL	500	4441	Brede, Ari	Fla	820	4473	Shaff, Jeff	SD	210	5202	Shaff, Jeff	SD	210								
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5556	Greene, Todd	Ana	630	5191	Lockhart, Keith	AtL	530	4362	Belle, Albert	CHA	2010	5417	Mouton, Lyle	CHA	530	4516	Leiter, Mark	Phi	800	5860	Bowers, Shane	Min	700	4958	Embree, Alan	AtL	700								
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5556	Greene, Todd	Ana	630	5191	Lockhart, Keith	AtL	530	4362	Belle, Albert	CHA	2010	5417	Mouton, Lyle	CHA	530	4516	Leiter, Mark	Phi	800	5860	Bowers, Shane	Min	700	4958	Embree, Alan	AtL	700								
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3857	Steinbach, Terry																																		

4017 Cora,Joey 740 498
4017 Cora,Joey 740 498

STARTING LINE UP*			
Position	Player ID#	Player Name	Salary
Catcher			
Catcher			
1st Base			
1st Base			
2nd Base			
2nd Base			
3rd Base			
3rd Base			
Shortstop			
Shortstop			
Outfield			

THE BENCH*

Position	Player ID#	Player Name	Salary
Bench 1			
Bench 2			
Bench 3			
Bench 4			
Bench 5			
Bench 6			
Bench 7			
Bench 8			
Bench 9			

Total Salary (cannot exceed \$35,000.000)

* You may include only players listed on the sheet enclosed in this mailing. Unlisted players must begin on the Bench and cannot be moved to the starting line-up until week 3.

****If you select a player not listed on the sheet enclosed in this mailing, please list his name and assign him a salary of \$750,000. TSN will assign his ID# and his position.**



WINNER: Belliard has appeared in 49 postseason games for Atlanta this decade.

Good luck charm

The Braves should hold on to infielder Rafael Belliard. He has to be some kind of postseason talisman. Belliard, a veteran of 16 major league seasons, has played for one of the teams that reached the N.L. Championship Series every season in the 1990s.

Belliard played for the 1990 Pirates club, which lost to the Reds in the LCS, then jumped to the Braves, who reached the playoffs in every succeeding year except 1994, when the postseason was canceled by the players strike. Belliard, however, did not appear in the postseason in '90 and last October.

Minnesota digs in

While Minnesota state legislators continue to try to devise a financial plan for a new baseball stadium, at-

torney general Hubert Humphrey III is trying to hit Major League Baseball where it hurts—in the antitrust exemption.

Humphrey has filed court papers charging that the threat by the Twins to move out of Minnesota unless they get a new stadium may be illegal.

"Available evidence suggests the respondents' threat to remove professional baseball from Minnesota may constitute an illegal boycott, a price-fixing agreement or the unlawful use of monopoly power," Humphrey said in a legal brief filed last week in Ramsey County District Court.

It is another in a series of legal gambits that municipalities have tried to prevent professional franchises from leaving town, but the future of the Twins in Minnesota still is likely to depend on the ability of the club to convince local politicians and voters to approve public funding for a new ballpark.

Out of touch

New Diamondbacks pitcher Andy Benes said last week that he might still be a member of the Cardinals if he had been more involved with the contract negotiations.

"If I'd been more involved, I'd probably still be (a Cardinal). I was a little naive," he told *The Evansville Courier*, his hometown newspaper in Indiana.

Instead, Benes left the situation in the hands of agent Scott Boras, who haggled too long over the last \$500,000 of a \$30 million deal with the Cardinals and then ended up accepting a three-year, \$18 million contract from the Diamondbacks.

Benes wasn't even privy to those negotiations. He found out he had joined the expansion team while he was in a remote part of Costa Rica participating in a Christian baseball ministry.



EX-REDBIRD: Benes won 28 games for St. Louis.

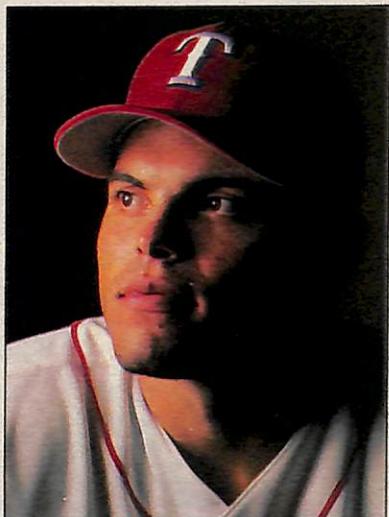
inside dish

FRONT OFFICE RUMBLINGS AND LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS

The Phillies averted an arbitration showdown with closer **Ricky Bottalico** when they settled on a one-year, \$2.2 million contract last week. The only question now is whether the promising righthander will go the distance with the club this year. The Orioles may come back with another offer for Bottalico this spring if doubts persist about **Armando Benitez**'s ability to hold down the closer's role. ... Don't read anything into the news that former Phillies manager **Jim Fregosi** has taken a front-office job with the Giants. Manager **Dusty Baker** doesn't have to look over his shoulder for anyone. ... The Mariners are reporting that they lost \$4.1 million last year, despite drawing a club record 3,192,237 fans and showing a 35 percent increase in revenues (from \$58 million to \$78 million).

Even so, club officials said it was the best annual financial result since the current ownership took over the club in 1992. If you believe those numbers, you've got to believe that **Randy Johnson** is history. ... Speaking of Johnson, if the Dodgers are really interested in trading **Eric Karros** and are willing to throw in one of their front-line starters, the Big Unit

would look pretty good in blue, and the Dodgers would be one step closer to the World Series. ... Texas catcher **Pudge Rodriguez** assured the club when he signed his \$42 million contract extension last year that he would stop playing winter ball in Puerto Rico, but it was a promise he couldn't keep. Fortunately for the Rangers, he came through unscathed, but the same couldn't be said for Blue Jays first baseman **Carlos Delgado** and Tigers infielder **Deivi Cruz**, both of whom will miss a significant portion of the season because of injuries suffered in winter ball. ... The Pirates had hoped that pitcher **Jeff Wallace** would be ready to start spring training on time, but he isn't all the way back from the elbow injury suffered against the Cardinals last September. However, he hopes to be at full strength in early March. Cautionary tale: Wallace suffered the same kind of injury (partially torn ligament) that turned premier closer **Gregg Olson** into a struggling journeyman. ... It's good to see **Maury Wills** land with the Blue Jays. He will be a running/base stealing instructor in spring training.



FUDGE RODRIGUEZ: Pudge broke his promise and played winter ball.

Astros



FAB FIVE: No one is quite sure what to expect from the pitching staff, but it's safe to assume the offense will be much improved in 1998. Right fielder **Derek Bell** believes this will be the best offensive club that he has been associated with. "Just think about it," Bell says. "We've got **Craig Biggio**, **Jeff Bagwell**, myself, **Moises Alou** and **Sean Berry** all in the same lineup. That's as good as any five guys in the league." Bell praised the front office on its offseason and says he is pleasantly surprised that owner **Drayton McLane Jr.** is willing to spend as much as \$38 million on salaries after having a \$33 million payroll in 1997.

ROLE REVERSAL: For the first time since 1987, the club reported to spring training as the defending division champion. Because the team needed only 84 wins—the fewest among division winners—to win the N.L. Central last season, some players feel a need to show the club wasn't just a one-year wonder. "We know it's not going to be easy," Bell says. "We're used to being the hunters instead of the hunted. Now, everyone is going to be giving us a run for our money." ... The team signed righthander **Sean Bergman** to a \$425,000 contract, avoiding arbitration. —*Carlton Thompson*

Cardinals



DON'T PACK YOUR BAGS, PAGS:

Although Tom Pagnozzi was expected to wind up with the Diamondbacks, he still is with the Cardinals and might be their top catcher. "There was no secret that I would have liked to go to Arizona," Pagnozzi says. "It was an opportunity to play in front of my dad—whom I'm close to. But I think people took it the wrong way—that I wanted out of St. Louis. That's not the case. I'm very happy in St. Louis." Manager **Tony La Russa** has said he wants Pagnozzi to be his starter, but Pagnozzi knows he is keeping the catcher's seat warm for rookie **Eli Marrero**. "He's the guy who's going to take over for the next eight or 10 years after I leave," Pagnozzi says.

WAIT 'TIL NEXT YEAR: The team avoided arbitration for another year by signing **John Mabry** to a \$1.4 million, one-year contract. Mabry had asked for \$1.95 million and the club was offering \$1.2 million. ... Pitcher **Alan Benes**, who had surgery September 2 to repair a tear in his rotator cuff and in his labrum, got a clean bill of health from Dr. **James Andrews**, who performed the surgery. Benes says Andrews talked of a conservative May 1 return but suggested Benes could return a couple of weeks before then. —*Rick Hummel*

Diamondbacks



MUTUAL RESPECT: It looks as though **Andy Stankiewicz** might have the first crack at the starting second base job. It never has been a well-hidden secret that manager **Buck Showalter** loves Stankiewicz and vice versa. Stankiewicz played for Showalter in 1992 when they were with the Yankees, and now the two have been reunited. The second base job originally was believed to be **Tony Batista's**, but now Stankiewicz has signed a one-year contract for \$350,000. Showalter believes Stankiewicz can handle the rigors of playing every day, which he really never has done in his four-year major league career. "Pound for pound, he'll probably be the strongest guy on our team," Showalter says. "Even if he doesn't start, he brings a lot to the table for us."

FOR WHOM BELL TOLLS: Within the span of one week, infielder **Mike Bell** went from being taken off the 40-man roster to being designated for assignment to being traded to the Mets for pitcher **Joe Lisio**. ... With **Hector Carrasco** agreeing to a contract, the only player who appears headed for arbitration is catcher **Jorge Fabregas**. ... ESPN has dictated that the Diamondbacks' first game, March 31 against Colorado, will begin at 8:05 p.m. local time. —*Pedro Gomez*

Braves



BLUE CHIP: Chipper Jones has averaged 25 homers and 110 RBIs the past two seasons but figures to be one of the lowest-paid power hitters in the game this year. In the third year of a four-year deal, he will be paid \$2.5 million this year and \$3.5 million next year, with the club holding a \$4.5 million option for 2000. Jones wants to renegotiate and extend the deal following the season. After hitting only .250 righthanded last year, the switch-hitting Jones has focused his attention this winter on improving his natural stroke.

VALUE JUDGMENT: The team avoided arbitration with two players, signing **Brad Clontz** to a one-year contract worth \$545,000 and **Gerald Williams** to a one-year, \$1.25 million deal with a club option for a second year. The contracts reflect big raises for mostly unimpressive players. Clontz received a \$300,000 raise despite splitting time between Atlanta and Class AAA Richmond last season, while Williams was given a \$550,000 raise for hitting .253 with the Brewers. **Javy Lopez**, who is negotiating a long-term deal, is the only player still in arbitration. ... Outfielder **Curtis Pride**, who hit .210 in 79 games with the Tigers last year, was invited to camp as a non-roster player. —*Bill Zack*



NOT SO CHIPPER: Jones wants to renegotiate.

Brewers



TAKING AIM: The club is taking a long-term view when it comes to contract negotiations. With eight key players wrapped up through the opening of Miller Park in 2000, the club has set its sights on reliever **Bob Wickman** and infielder **Mark Loretta**. Both men were offered two-year deals with club options for a third season. Wickman, a Wisconsin native, isn't hiding the fact that he would like to be the team's closer some day. That could be possible if **Doug Jones** falters for any amount of time next season. Loretta, an overachieving product of the farm system, is capable of playing all four infield positions.

ODD MEN OUT: There are two position players in the projected opening day lineup who have not been offered multiyear deals. One is catcher **Mike Matheny**, whom the club considers a glorified backup. The other is first baseman **John Jaha**, whose case is far more interesting. If the injury-plagued Jaha produces his anticipated 30-homer, 100-RBI season heading into free agency, he likely will price himself out of the club's reach. Insiders say the club would be willing to use **Dave Nilsson** at first and former first-round pick **Geoff Jenkins** in left field if Jaha leaves. —*Drew Olson*

Cubs



AMICABLE BREAK-UP: While everyone is concerned about the monstrous back-to-back strikeout totals that **Sammy Sosa** and **Henry Rodriguez** are capable of putting up,

Cubs manager **Jim Riggleman** has one idea of how to break that up. He wants to break up Sosa and Rodriguez. Riggleman says he's considering batting Sosa third, **Mark Grace** fourth and Rodriguez fifth. The good news for Sosa is he would have protection from Grace, who doesn't hit for power but is a well-respected hitter who hits for high average. The bad news for Grace is he'd have Rodriguez behind him as a potential strikeout, but Grace is used to that with Sosa.

LOTS OF LEFTIES: Lance Johnson definitely will be the leadoff man and **Mickey Morandini** will bat second, so if Grace batted third, that would set up three straight lefties at the top of the order. That scenario may be another reason Riggleman wants to flip Grace and Sosa from their traditional third and fourth spots in the lineup. Riggleman also likes the protection it gives his batting order later in the game. "It makes it a little tougher later for the other manager to bring a lefthanded reliever in because it's going to force him to make two moves," Riggleman says. —*Barry Rozner*

Expos



SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE: The signing of lefthander **Carlos Perez** to a one-year, \$1.5 million contract last week means the team will avoid the arbitration process altogether this season. Perez had been asking for \$2 million; the team offered \$1.2 million. As is usually the case, they split the difference. ... Super sub **F.P. Santangelo** also signed a one-year deal last week for \$325,000. That makes him the fifth-highest paid player on a team whose payroll will come in at a minuscule \$10 million. The only notables left unsigned as training camp opened were closer **Ugueth Urbina**, right fielder **Vladimir Guerrero** and shortstop **Mark Grudzielanek**.

EXPERIENCE WANTED: You have to think that some of the journeyman players signed by the team to minor league contracts over the winter have a good shot at making a very inexperienced club. The average major league experience of the 36 players on the roster is 150 days—less than a full season. The eight experienced players invited to camp, including pitchers **Shawn Boskie** and **Mike Maddux**, infielders **Scott Livingstone** and **Mike Mordecai**, and outfielders **Chuck Carr** and **Derrick May**, average five years, 38 days of major league service time. —*Stephanie Myles*

National League

Giants

RICH & REY ROTATION? It worked at third base, so why not at shortstop? Manager **Dusty Baker** is toying with the idea of a platoon at short with **Rich Aurilia** and **Rey Sanchez**, similar to last year's platoon at third with **Bill Mueller** and **Mark Lewis**. Aurilia is the longtime backup and Sanchez the seasoned veteran. "Richie deserves strong consideration," Baker says. "He's been patient all these years, and every year somebody has come in and taken his position." Baker may pick a shortstop based on who's pitching for the opposition and what the rest of the lineup looks like. "Rey maybe has a higher average, but Richie has more sock and RBI potential," Baker says. There is a potential problem: Short is the key defensive infield position, and if one must sit a few days he might not be as sharp. Both are good in the field; if one went down, the other could play every day.

TAVAREZ'S TIME? Righthander **Julian Tavarez**, a reliever last year who desperately wants to start, helped his chances with six shutout innings in the Dominicans' 3-0 win over Venezuela that clinched the Caribbean Series. He will start in spring training. If he doesn't have the stamina, he'll go to the bullpen, with **Danny Darwin** likely to be the No. 5 starter. —*Henry Schulman*

Padres

PITCHING RULE: New pitching coach **Dave Stewart** made it quite clear he expects his starters to hang tough on the mound. Stewart will scrutinize several starting candidates who are competing for the final two spots in the rotation. Incumbents **Sterling Hitchcock** and **Pete Smith** have the inside track, but the club is intrigued by **Mark Langston**. When general manager **Kevin Towers** moved Stewart into the job, he said he expected Stewart to get more out of starters **Andy Ashby** and **Joey Hamilton**. Those two were part of a rotation that had a 4.98 ERA and averaged fewer than six innings per start in 1997. Towers reiterated that he expects a salary dispute with Hamilton to go to arbitration. The two sides are about \$875,000 apart.

ON THE MARC: Reliever **Marc Kroon** is a good bet to break camp with the team. The club believes he will evolve into a standout. Alongside Kroon in the bullpen will be **Trevor Hoffman** and, most likely, newcomers **Ed Vosberg**, **Dan Miceli** and **Brian Boehringer**. That leaves one spot, perhaps two, up for grabs. The other candidates could include a loser from the starting derby, plus **Don Wengert**, **Donne Wall** and minor leaguers **Heath Murray** and **Matt Clement**. —*Tom Krasovic*

Pirates

IS FREDDY READY? Freddy Garcia's career major league average is .144. In his only experience at the Class AAA level, he batted .240. Yet Garcia is getting the first shot at claiming the vacancy at third base and needs to take a major step up to get the job. General manager **Cam Bonifay** says that starts with concentration. "He has to learn not to give away at-bats, which at times, he does," Bonifay says. "He'll have to adjust to the better pitching, which every young hitter goes through when he advances to another level." In fairness to Garcia, his stats are skewed by the 1995 season he spent with the club as a totally overmatched Rule 5 player fresh out of Class A. He batted .140 that season.

FISCAL FITNESS: The organization has made some curious decisions in spending its limited funds. Pitcher **Jon Lieber** has a two-year contract worth \$3.5 million after he wasn't even expected to be protected from the expansion draft. Backup catcher **Keith Osik**'s deal also is questionable. His three-year contract is worth a total of \$1.025 million, which is modest by today's standards. But it seems like a lengthy commitment to a player who has averaged 123 at-bats in his two major league seasons. —*John Mehno*



Marlins

GOODBYE LEITER: The team traded Al Leiter and second baseman **Ralph Milliard** to the Mets for minor league pitchers **Jesus Sanchez** and **A.J. Burnett** and minor league outfielder **Robert Stratton**. The deal relieves the team of Leiter's \$3 million salary in '98 and assures that **Livan Hernandez** will be the only starting pitcher returning from last season. Of the players the team acquired, Sanchez, 23, is the closest to becoming a big-leaguer. A lefthander, Sanchez led the Eastern League in strikeouts in 1997. He's only 5-10 and 170 pounds, but he throws a fastball in the low 90s. Sanchez may pitch in Class AAA, but the team need arms on the major league level, too.

ALEX UPDATE: **Alex Fernandez**, who had surgery to repair a torn right rotator cuff, believes he can pitch for the team in 1998. Fernandez has lost some serious weight, largely because of a self-imposed training program that has him working out 4½ hours a day. He believes his workouts will hasten his recovery. The team, however, has an incentive to keep Fernandez out this entire season: 80 percent of his \$7 million salary is covered by an insurance policy as long as he doesn't pitch in the majors in '98. —*Dan Graziano*



HEAD START: Outfield battle begins early for Amaro.

Reds

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH? In their search to find low-risk, potentially high-dividend players whose stock may have fallen, the Reds acquired International League MVP **Roberto Petagine** from the Mets for shortstop **Yuri Sanchez**, who hit .255 for Class A Burlington last season. Petagine, 26, who can play first base and the outfield, hit .317 with 31 home runs and 100 RBIs for Class AAA Norfolk last season, but don't assume he's destined for stardom. Petagine was promoted to the majors for stints each of the past four seasons but hasn't shown he's capable of producing at the major league level. Petagine's best chance for playing time this season likely will be at first base if **Eduardo Perez** and **Dmitri Young** fail to impress.

SALARY DUMP: The team still would like to cut one more sizable salary—most notably second baseman **Bret Boone** or right fielder **Reggie Sanders**. Finding the right trade has been the problem. But Boone may have helped his stock by finally trying to alter his batting stance, which contributed to his .233 average last season. ... The Reds approached **Bob Watson** about taking a job in the organization, but the former Yankees G.M. decided to pass on the offer. —*Mike Bass*



Mets

BAERGA'S REPLACEMENT? Second baseman **Ralph Milliard**, acquired in the Al Leiter deal, may have a significant role with the club, especially if **Carlos Baerga** doesn't upgrade his production. Prompted by positive evaluations from major league scout **Carmen Fusco**, the team sought Milliard because it didn't have a backup second baseman and Baerga's contract expires after the season. Aware of his positive influence on the players, the club would love to re-sign Baerga for 1999 and beyond if he produces like he did in the A.L. before 1996. ... The club hired former major league pitcher **Doug Simons**, a Met in 1991, as a Class A pitching coach.

ALFONZO SIGNED: Some 11 months after he showed concern about his major league status, **Edgardo Alfonzo** has gained financial security. It came to the third baseman last week in the form of a \$1.75 million contract for the 1998 season. Not bad for a player manager **Bobby Valentine** thought should start the 1997 season in the minors. With **Todd Hundley** unable to play regularly in the second half of '97, Alfonzo emerged as the team's best player and placed 13th in the N.L. MVP balloting. —*Marty Noble*

Phillies

EAGER AND ANXIOUS: With very few starting jobs available in spring training, a large contingent of players were early arrivals in Clearwater, Fla. That group included pitchers **Curt Schilling**, **Matt Beech**, **Mike Welch** and **Wayne Gomes**, outfielders **Lenny Dykstra**, **Wendell Magee**, **Rex Hudler** and **Ruben Amaro**, and infielders **Marlon Anderson**, **Desi Relaford** and **David Doster**. "I was surprised so many guys are here, but we have a lot of young players trying to prove themselves," catcher **Mike Lieberthal** says.

CAMP COMPETITION: One of the only wide-open areas of manager **Terry Francona**'s roster is the bullpen, where **Ricky Bottalico** likely will be joined by righthanders **Jerry Spradlin** and **Mark Leiter** and one lefthander from the trio of **Billy Brewer**, **Yorkis Perez** and **Darrin Winston**. "Yes, we've still got some work to do, but we know if our pitching is healthy we'll have a chance," Francona says. ... Dykstra has continued to look impressive during batting practice. He has bulked up to about 190 pounds, and his legs have regained most of their early 1990s thickness. Watching carefully will be new center fielder **Doug Glanville**, who stands to benefit from any Dykstra setback. —*Chris Edwards*

Rockies

TALL ORDER: **Todd Helton** will make \$190,000 in '98, or \$7.8 million less than the Braves will pay **Andres Galarraga**. But that wide salary discrepancy doesn't mean the Rockies don't have high hopes for Helton, who was their 1995 No. 1 draft pick. Although the club doesn't expect Helton to approach Galarraga's back-to-back National League RBI titles and 88 homers over the last two seasons, they do anticipate Helton making a strong run at the N.L. Rookie of the Year Award. Helton hit .280 with five homers and 11 RBIs in 35 games with the Rockies last season after being called up.

RARIFIED AIR: **Darryl Kile** defied conventional wisdom when he brought the game's best curveball to the Colorado altitude for three years and \$24 million. But pitching coach **Frank Funk** is convinced Kile has the makeup to pitch successfully in Coors Field. "The good pitchers can pitch anywhere," Funk says. "If you think you're going to pitch here and have a 2.98 ERA, that's not likely. But you can have a 4.00 ERA and win a lot of games." ... Shortstop **Neifi Perez** was voted the MVP of the Caribbean World Series. Perez led the Dominican Republic to the title by hitting .444 with five RBIs and six doubles in six games. —*Tony DeMarco*

Angels



FINLEY'S FINE: One of the biggest questions going into camp has been answered: **Chuck Finley**, who missed the last six weeks of 1997 because of a wrist injury, has been throwing three times a week since early January and has been able to throw the forkball, his signature pitch and one that can be taxing on the wrist. "Everything's aligned perfectly... I feel great," says Finley, who won 10 consecutive games before slipping and fracturing a bone in his left wrist during a game August 19.

PITCHING PURSUIT: The rotation appears set, but the team was furiously working to upgrade the staff. The team attended Cuban refugee **Orlando Hernandez**'s workouts in Costa Rica and is one of the contenders to sign the righthander, who is the half-brother of 1997 World Series MVP **Livan Hernandez**. The team also began negotiations with free-agent pitcher **Jack McDowell**, who is trying to rebound from elbow surgery that sidelined him for most of '97. It's doubtful the Angels would have room in their budget—or roster—for both pitchers, but the addition of a healthy McDowell or a 1995 version of Hernandez, when he was ace of the Cuban National team, would greatly enhance their playoff chances. ... The Angels avoided arbitration by signing **Allen Watson** to a one-year, \$2.9 million contract. —Mike DiGiovanna

Blue Jays



HEALTH MATTERS: So far, so good for third baseman **Ed Sprague** and starter **Juan Guzman** as they recover from late-season shoulder operations. Both players participated in minicamp ahead of the official February 16 reporting date for pitchers and catchers. But Sprague and Guzman are just two of the health questions that need to be resolved in camp. Is righthander **Erik Hanson** ready to go following May shoulder surgery? Has catcher **Benito Santiago** recovered enough from his January 4 car crash to be ready for opening day? Is DH **Jose Canseco**'s chronically sore back as fit as he claimed during contract negotiations? And how long will injured **Carlos Delgado** be out—and who replaces him at first base? The medical ward will have yet another guest as well: reliever **Kelvim Escobar**, who rolled his Jeep in Venezuela. He's expected to be OK.

LIMITED OPTIONS: Canseco, a two-time A.L. home run champ, has been on the disabled list six times in the past six seasons. With no other solid offer on this continent, he accepted the Jays' offer of a \$750,000 base salary with incentives (which could push the total value of the deal to \$3 million). That's a steep slide from the \$4.725 million Oakland paid him last season. "I'm in a situation where I have to prove myself as a player again," Canseco, 33, says. "It's a matter of one thing—can Jose stay healthy?" —Tom Maloney

Indians



BATTLE STATION: Now that **Chuck Knoblauch** is in New York, the competition for second base is set: Rookie **Enrique Wilson** and **Carlos Garcia** will fight it out. Wilson has the edge, but that could change. The winner probably will be the player who has the best camp with the bat. "We think defensively Enrique will be a hell of a player," G.M. **John Hart** says. "Will he be the offensive player we need? Spring training will tell that." Hart adds that "in a perfect world, Enrique Wilson steps in and takes the job." Wilson has outstanding range and a strong arm at shortstop, but he's stuck behind **Ómar Vizquel**, who is signed through 2001. Wilson was moved to second last season at Class AAA Buffalo. If Garcia doesn't win the job, he could stick as a utility infielder. **Jeff Branson**, a lefthanded hitter, also is expected to make the team as a utility man. It's unlikely Wilson, who has an option left, will be kept to play that role. He's 22, and the team wants him to play every day, whether it's in Cleveland or Buffalo.

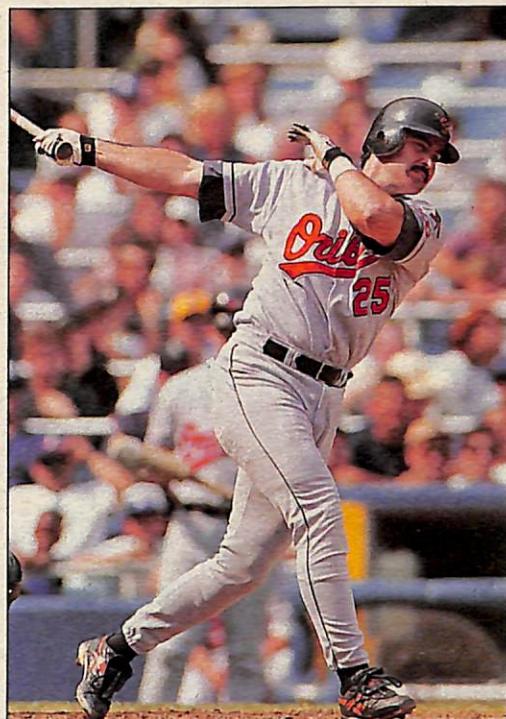
A CROWD: Although catcher **Ron Karkovice** has been invited to camp on a minor league contract, he's not expected to unseat **Pat Borders** as the backup to **Sandy Alomar Jr.** And the team won't keep three catchers. If Karkovice, who missed most of last season with knee injuries, has a good camp, he could catch the eye of another team. —Steve Herrick

Athletics



TWO JOBS STILL OPEN: Going into spring training, the club is faced with two major decisions: Who's the fifth starter, and who's the closer? A handful of candidates are vying to fill out the rotation behind **Tom Candiotti**, **Kenny Rogers**, **Brad Rigby** and **Jimmy Haynes**. But only two are competing for the closer spot: **Mike Fetters**, who came over from Milwaukee in a trade, and **Billy Taylor**, who had the job much of last year. When the A's added Fettters, it was assumed by some that he would just walk into the job. But Fettters, Taylor and manager **Art Howe** don't think that's the case. Howe says he has "an open mind" and is looking forward to the competition. "It's a nice position to be in," he says. "In the past we have only had one (candidate)." Fettters saved 32 games for the Brewers in 1996 and thought he had a permanent job. But last year he injured a hamstring in spring training, and by the time it healed **Doug Jones** had the closer job and Fettters was given no opportunity to win it back.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS: If Taylor and Fettters should falter, the A's could turn to **T.J. Mathews**, who saved three games for the A's last season and had six saves for the Cardinals in 1996. Pitching coach **Bob Cluck** says lefthanders **Buddy Groom** or **Mike Mohler** also might be brought in to close if the opposition brings in a string of lefthanded hitters late in a game. —David Bush



NO BARGAIN: Palmeiro wants his full market value.

Devil Rays



COMPETITION WELCOME: Although the team will open camp with 72 players, a large number of jobs already appear to be claimed by veterans acquired through the expansion draft, trades and free agency. But that doesn't mean the established players can coast through manager **Larry Rothschild**'s first spring training. General manager **Chuck LaMar** would like to see, for example, **Bobby Smith**, **Brooks Kieschnick** and **Herbert Perry** push **Wade Boggs** at third, **Fred McGriff** at first and **Paul Sorrento** at DH, respectively. "No matter how much they're signed for, no matter how long their contract is, we have to put the best club on the field," LaMar says, referring to everyone in camp. Still, it's unlikely those three veterans won't start. Smith, who is highly regarded in the organization because of his overall athleticism, could be a backup infielder, and Perry could get some at-bats as a part-time DH. Kieschnick appears to have the toughest odds of the three to make the roster if he isn't a starter.

NOT READY: Outfielder **Paul Wilder**, the team's first-round pick in 1996 whose career has been slowed by injuries, won't be part of the major league camp. Wilder had been invited, but his recovery from a back injury would have limited his participation. He could be ready for minor league spring training, which begins March 7, and start the season in Class A. —Marc Topkin

Orioles



QUIET CAMP: It should be a relatively peaceful spring for the team. **Davey Johnson** is gone, and the roster is all but set. Manager **Ray Miller** probably could write out his lineup card right now and correctly predict his 25-man opening day roster. Still, there are issues that remain unresolved. First baseman **Rafael Palmeiro** is entering the final year of his contract and has said he won't accept substantially less than market value to stay in Baltimore. Second baseman **Roberto Alomar** is in the same situation, and figures to take the same approach with the club. There also is the possible fallout from the less-pressing arbitration dispute between the team and outfielder **Jeffrey Hammonds**. He is coming off his biggest year (.264, 22 home runs and 55 RBIs) to date and would like to be treated—and paid—like one of the club's best young players.

WILL THERE BE ROOM? The club opens camp with five veteran starting pitchers, which is good news for the franchise but not necessarily for a couple of promising young pitchers. Top prospect **Nerio Rodriguez** may soon break into the major leagues, and former top pitching prospect **Rocky Copper** has worked hard to come back from an arm injury and a weight problem to compete for a roster spot. Both figure to show up in the majors this year but probably will have to wait for someone to falter to get a chance. —Peter Schmuck

Mariners



CASHES IN: The roller-coaster ride reliever **Bobby Ayala** has been on for the past three seasons is going up again. Ayala, who has been chided for his failures since a superb '94 season (18 saves, 46 appearances and a 2.86 ERA), was rewarded for his 10 wins in '97 with a two-year contract, avoiding arbitration. Ayala ended an escalating ERA problem (from 2.86 to 4.44 to 5.88 in '96) last season with a 3.82 mark in a career-high 71 appearances. **Heathcliff Slocumb** is the No. 1 closer, but **Lou Piniella** says Ayala will get chances to close games. Ayala has 48 saves with the club and is one of the reasons Piniella is bullish on his bullpen. Piniella said lefthander **Tony Fossas** will strengthen the bullpen, and Piniella's confident righthander **Mike Timlin** will do a good job in the setup role and occasional closing chances. ... Ayala and **Randy Johnson** are the only pitchers on the projected staff who have been with the Mariners since '94.

NO SLIDING: Third baseman **Russ Davis** checked into spring training three days early and jokingly announced, "Sliding is out this season." Davis missed the final five weeks of the 1997 regular season and the playoffs with a severely sprained right ankle after sliding into Yankees catcher **Joe Girardi** on August 25. ... Last week, potential starter **Felipe Lira** agreed to a one-year deal and avoided arbitration. —Jim Street

American League

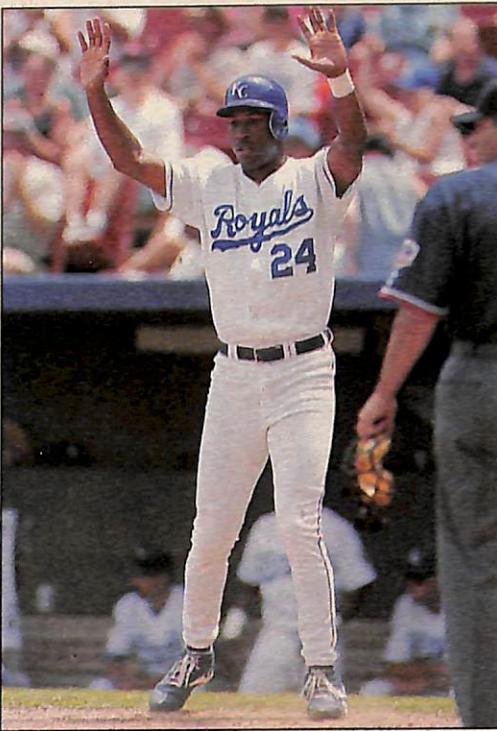
Rangers



AVOIDING ARBITERS: General manager Doug Melvin avoided arbitration cases for pitchers Darren Oliver and Aaron Sele one week before their scheduled hearings.

Oliver tripled his salary with a \$3.05 million contract. Sele, who earned \$1.126 million in 1997 with the Red Sox, will make \$2.85 million in 1998.

WINTER WORRIES: Burned by the winter league postseason last year, Melvin was displeased. Ivan Rodriguez participated in the recent Caribbean World Series. Rodriguez played for Puerto Rico and caught 14 innings in one game during the series. The Rangers have not been able to contact him and determine if he was going to make it to spring training on time. Melvin asked Rodriguez not to play, but his plea was rejected. "He told me he wants to play for his countrymen," Melvin says. "But I told him I didn't understand or buy the reason." Melvin's frustration has to do with the team's investment. Rodriguez is guaranteed \$42 million over the next five years. Last year, the club lost Juan Gonzalez until May 3 because Gonzalez tore the ulnar collateral ligament in his left thumb diving for a ball in the Puerto Rico Winter League. ... Third baseman Fernando Tatis did not participate in the recent Caribbean World Series because of visa problems. The club does not expect the visa to be a problem when he comes to spring training. —Kevin Lonnquist



LOCK AND LOAD: Dye is a sure bet in right field.

Red Sox

CONSTRUCTIVE CONTRACT TALK:

While the team has spent the winter haggling over a contract extension with Mo Vaughn, G.M. Dan Duquette has been willing to reward others with lengthy contracts. The latest is outfielder Troy O'Leary, who signed a four-year contract. O'Leary's deal follows offseason multiyear contracts signed by Tom Gordon, Tim Wakefield, Pedro Martinez, John Valentin and Jeff Frye. Next on Duquette's agenda: securing shortstop Nomar Garciaparra to a long-term contract for a reported for seven years.

ROTATION PLANS: Pitching coach Joe Kerrigan's plans for the rotation include Martinez, Wakefield and Butch Henry as the top 3. If Bret Saberhagen is healthy, he will be in the rotation. That leaves Steve Avery, Derek Lowe, Robinson Checo, John Wasdin, Brian Rose and Chris Bosio competing for one spot. Saberhagen made his spring training debut, throwing fluidly and without pain. He missed almost two years with shoulder surgery and pitched sparingly at the end of last season. Rose, a 17-game winner for Class AAA Pawtucket, may have an inside track on the fifth spot. But he has minor league options available, and Wasdin and Lowe don't. Bosio, coming off knee surgery, could challenge for a job in the rotation or the bullpen. Avery must earn a spot in the rotation, or the team will attempt to trade him. —Paul Doyle

Royals



DARK HORSE SWEEPSTAKES: Righthanded reliever Jose Santiago is a youngster to watch at spring training. He pitched impressively enough in Puerto Rico to pique manager Tony Muser's curiosity significantly. Santiago, who was with the Royals briefly last September, led the Puerto Rican League with a 5-2 record, eight saves and an ERA of 2.39 in 31 relief appearances. He pitched efficiently and quickly, challenging hitters and showing confidence. Santiago, 23, will get a hard look at that righthanded setup spot with Jaime Bluma and Lee Smith. Muser's obvious concern is consistency and an ability to work consecutive days. Santiago has a leg up because he comes into spring training already rolling. Bluma sat out the 1997 season. Smith was with Montreal for 25 appearances and is coming out of semi-retirement.

DYE IN RIGHT: Jermaine Dye is close to a lock to start in right field. Health problems prevented him from getting into good playing shape in 1997. But he stepped it up during the winter season, hitting .307 with 10 homers and 31 RBIs in 33 games in Puerto Rico while showing better speed and athleticism in the outfield and on the basepaths. Muser seems to be trying to take some pressure off Dye that followed him when he was acquired from Atlanta. Dye is likely to bat sixth or seventh, although Muser doesn't rule out a move up in the order. —Luciana Chavez

Twins



SECOND CHOICE: Todd Walker is expected to take over at second base for Chuck Knoblauch, who was traded to the Yankees for four minor leaguers and \$3 million. But to

make the transition smoother, Walker must improve on the .194 average he compiled in a 1997 season spent shuttling between the Twins and Class AAA Salt Lake. If Walker falters, non-roster invitee Brent Gates is next in line at second base. Ron Coomer is expected to play full time at third base, Walker's 1997 position. And newly acquired outfielder Otis Nixon will take over Knoblauch's leadoff role. ... Pitcher Frank Rodriguez lost his arbitration hearing and will be paid \$425,000 rather than his request of \$880,000. Rodriguez, 25, went 3-6 with a 4.62 ERA last season.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Of the four players the Twins got in the Knoblauch trade, pitcher Eric Milton could make the first impact. Milton went a combined 14-6 with a 3.11 ERA and 162 strikeouts in 171 innings in Classes A and AA last season. His velocity is in the low 90s and he has better-than-adequate control. Once Milton gets command of his breaking stuff, he should be ready for the majors. Brian Buchanan, a righthanded-hitting outfielder, is the No. 2 prospect. He can hit the long ball but needs to cut down his strikeouts and show patience. Shortstop Christian Guzman and pitcher Danny Mota are longer-term prospects. —John Millea

White Sox



SPEEDY RECOVERY: There's only one starting pitcher left from the team's 1993 playoff rotation, righthander Jason Bere. And even though he's still trying to make a complete

recovery from elbow surgery, Bere, 26, is confident he can return to form. "I've been throwing since December, and the velocity is coming back," Bere says. "I want to get back into the position where I can take the ball every five days and know everybody can count on me to put us in a position to win." Bere made six starts at the end of last season and was 4-2 with a 4.71 ERA. Then, he relied on off-speed pitches. But in 1998, Bere plans on being more like the power pitcher he was in 1993-94 when he went a combined 24-7.

TIME TO TALK: Robin Ventura, who is eligible for free agency after this season, is expected to talk about a long-term contract with chairman Jerry Reinsdorf during spring training. But Reinsdorf has been busy tending to his other team, the Bulls. Ventura won't demand a Matt Williams type of deal (five years, \$45 million), but he isn't expected to settle for less than four years at \$32 million. ... The team continues to pursue free-agent pitcher Jack McDowell. But assuming the team outbids competitors, would McDowell agree to work for Reinsdorf again? During his first run with the team, McDowell went through arbitration three times and constantly clashed with Reinsdorf. —Scot Gregor

Yankees



SUDDEN IMPACT: The addition of second baseman Chuck Knoblauch will affect some of the team's holdovers. Three of the most affected will be the left field trio of

Darryl Strawberry, Tim Raines and Chad Curtis. The Knoblauch signing may hurt Raines the most of this group because, now, there is no need for a leadoff hitter, and Strawberry and Curtis are more likely candidates to bat in the middle of the lineup. Also, the team would appear to have less need for infielders Homer Bush and Andy Fox. ... For now, the question of Knoblauch's future with the team will remain unanswered. Although Knoblauch is under contract for four more years, players traded during the middle of multiyear contracts can force their way onto the free-agent market after their first season with their new team. But new G.M. Brian Cashman indicated that there are more pressing issues to deal with now.

SALARY SHOWDOWN: Cashman indicated one of his top concerns is the contractual situations of Bernie Williams and Andy Pettitte, as both players have arbitration hearings scheduled for this week. All eyes in baseball will be on the Williams hearing because it will affect future top salaries (Williams asked for \$9 million; the Yankees submitted a figure of \$7.5 million). Either way, the chances for the team to get something done long term with Williams appear slim. —Jon Heyman



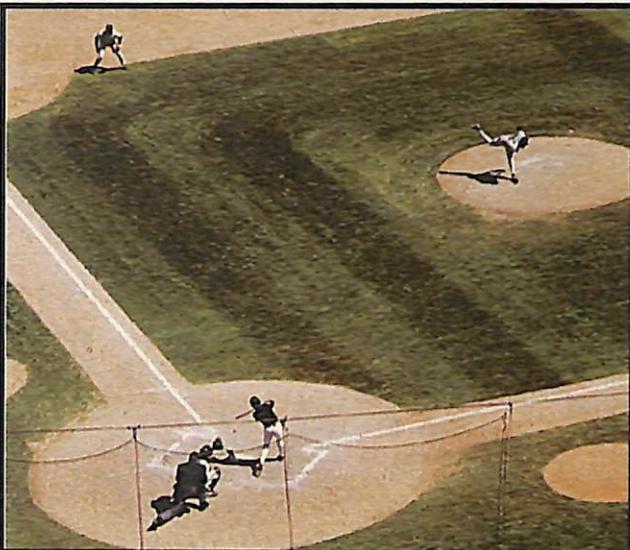
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Insider

Dan Pompei



THE MEASURE OF GAILEY: The abilities to adjust to his players' strengths and weaknesses and developing young players are two of the strengths of the Cowboys' latest coach.

To earn respect, Gailey must listen to conscience

They will say Chan Gailey was the last girl sitting alone at the bar. After all, 14 head coaches were hired in the 14 months preceding Gailey's hiring. Gailey wasn't even on Jerry Jones' "A" list. Jones danced first with Terry Donahue, George Seifert and Sherm Lewis.

Then, they will look for Jones' lips to move whenever Gailey speaks. After all, Jones didn't want to give Donahue and Seifert the authority they demanded.

Then, they will wait for the first time that a pass should have been a run. Gailey, they will say, shaking their heads, has made that mistake before.

But the skeptics should realize Jones could have done a lot worse than hiring Gailey as coach of the Cowboys. In fact, he did do a lot worse when he hired Barry Switzer—and the Cowboys still won a Super Bowl.

It's difficult to imagine the Cowboys going to hell under Gailey the way they did with Switzer. Those who have worked with Gailey will tell you he is meticulously organized, disciplined and committed. When he was head coach of the Birmingham Fire of the World League, Gailey would prepare for the draft by working through the night, according to Jaguars senior vice president of football operations Michael Huyghue, who was general manager of the Fire. Switzer also is known for working through the night, in a manner of speaking. Gailey consistently beats his co-workers to the office in the morning. While other coaches try to get their minds off football during a bye week by playing golf, Gailey just spends more time studying game tape.

Gailey, 46, will not be disrespectful toward

Jones the way Jimmy Johnson was. It isn't in his nature. And it isn't like he hasn't worked for autocrats before. He has plenty of experience with demanding bosses, having answered to Bill Cowher in Pittsburgh and Dan Reeves in Denver. He's also smart enough to be flexible, as he learned to adapt to less than ideal conditions as head coach of the Fire.

There is no getting around the fact Jones is running the personnel end of the Cowboys, and he needs to have a coach who is receptive to his ideas. That Jones is paying Gailey more like a coordinator than a head coach tells us how Jones perceives Gailey's role, as well as his own.

But Gailey needs to listen to his conscience more than Jones'. The Cowboys have sorely lacked creative tension since Johnson's departure. "Yes" isn't always the answer that makes an organization step forward. Gailey has to feel secure enough to tell Jones to butt out if

Jones oversteps his bounds. Gailey is going to have to earn the respect of a veteran team, and he's not going to do that by fetching coffee for his boss.

It was interesting that Jones indicated one of the main reasons he chose Gailey over Lewis is Gailey has called plays in critical situations. Some would say that is the very reason Jones should have avoided him. Gailey was even criticized within the Steelers' organization for a call during the AFC title game. On a second-and-1 play at Denver's 35, Gailey called for Kordell Stewart to take a shot at the end zone instead of a safe run for a first down. Stewart was intercepted, and the Broncos subsequently turned a 14-7 deficit into a 24-21 win. The call would have looked a lot smarter had Stewart followed instructions and dumped off the ball or scrambled rather than throw into coverage.

But some of the criticism of Gailey is warranted. There are times when you simply do not look a workhorse such as Jerome Bettis in the mouth, though part of what made Bettis effective is the balance Gailey struck with the offense and Gailey's penchant for getting a defense to guess wrong.

"He's good at catching you off guard with a gimmick play," says Bengals defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau, who worked with Gailey in Pittsburgh before last season. "He has a higher percentage of success with those plays than most people. We were really preparing for the quarterback draw when we played them. But they hurt us with it because he sprung it at a time you wouldn't expect, and he couched it in formations we didn't expect it from."

Ravens defensive coordinator Marvin Lewis, who also worked with Gailey in Pittsburgh, says Gailey shows something new every week; consequently, Gailey's offenses are among the most difficult to prepare for. In 1995, the season the Steelers went to the Super Bowl, Gailey had great success with a five-receiver package.

If Stewart's play exposed the idiot in Gailey, it also exposed the genius. Two of the most important measures of a coach are his ability to adjust to his players' strengths and weaknesses and his ability to develop young players. Stewart is a passing, scrambling testament that Gailey can do either as well as almost anyone. Gailey figured out how to use the unique abilities of Stewart as a starting quarterback and helped figure out how to use him as a hybrid quarterback/receiver/running back. Stewart was a

player who needed good coaching to ascend to the brink of greatness, and he got it from Gailey.

Even though Gailey never was a candidate for an NFL head-coaching job before, his credentials are as impressive as any candidate Jones interviewed, with the exception of Seifert. If Gailey can combine the Cowboys' talent with the Steelers' approach, the Cowboys will take their first step back toward respectability.

TSN

A domino effect

The trade of Jim Harbaugh from the Colts to the Ravens could affect as many as six quarterbacks. The Ravens gave the Colts their '98 third-round draft pick (the teams also swapped fourth-round picks) for Harbaugh (1), who is expected to start for Baltimore next season. The Ravens, who suddenly lost interest in retired quarterback Jim Kelly (2), apparently are willing to let Vinny Testaverde (3) go. The Jets are looking to replace Neil O'Donnell (4) and were believed to have had an interest in Harbaugh but most likely would be disinclined to acquire Testaverde. The Colts, meanwhile, probably will hold on to the No. 1 overall draft pick and select Peyton Manning (5), although they still could try to package the pick in a deal with the Panthers for Kerry Collins (6).

Senior writer Dan Pompei covers the NFL for THE SPORTING NEWS. E-mail him at pompei@sportingnews.com.

Unknown quantity

The Bills' acquisition of Rob Johnson may turn out to be a great move. But it is a risky one. Three years ago, the Jaguars took the quarterback in the fourth round of the draft, with the 99th overall pick. To get him from Jacksonville, the Bills gave up the ninth overall pick in this year's draft, along with a fourth-round pick.

How is it that with one regular-season start (in last year's season opener) Johnson could have vaulted 90 picks?

There simply isn't enough film to draw a complete picture of Johnson. When he came out of Southern California, the knocks on him were that he couldn't win the big game and wasn't much of a leader. Those knocks may or may not be accurate, but Johnson hasn't done anything to prove otherwise in his three years as a pro. He hasn't had the chance to.

The Jaguars did a nice job of selling Johnson, and they found two serious bidders in a quarterback-desperate league. The Ravens helped their AFC Central foe by driving up the price. They made it clear they were willing to give up more than the Bills (their offer was believed to be the 10th overall pick in the draft and a third-round pick), but the Jaguars preferred to get Johnson out of the division. Even though Kevin Gilbride was Johnson's coordinator with the Jaguars, the quarterback-needy Chargers didn't offer more than a second-round pick for Johnson.

CROSSED SIGNALS: The Bills overpaid for Johnson, who needs some polishing.

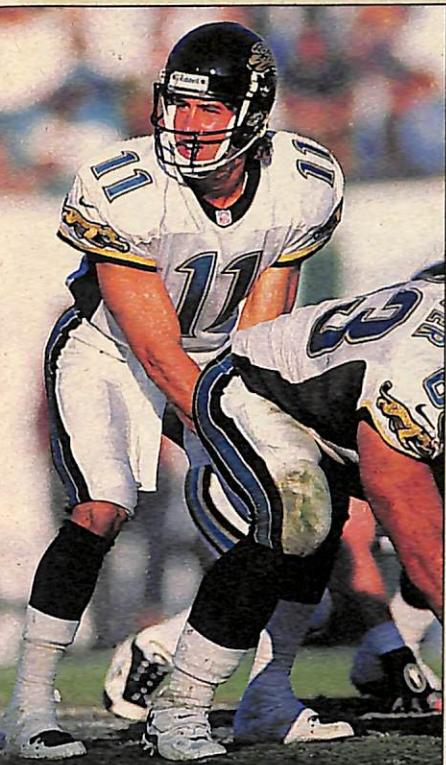
There were no other serious bidders, and the reason is that Johnson remains very much an unknown quantity. At the very least, he will take time to develop.

A hot cold war

The NFL Players Association continues its cold war with the NFL Management Council, threatening to make 2000 an uncapped year by failing to ratify an extension of the collective bargaining agreement.

The management council has made some concessions in order to appease the players association, but it may not be enough. The council gave up on trying to get a "cap for the cap" for money spent over the salary cap ceiling, and it also abandoned efforts to include a rookie pay-for-performance deal. Owners originally wanted to set aside a sizable percentage of the rookie salary pool and award it after the season based on performances. Hypothetically, it could have resulted in an undrafted free agent who becomes a starter because of injury making more money than a first-round draft pick who was being brought along slowly.

The players association is holding



ED NESSER/TSN

firm on its demand that players who are cut during the first half of the season be guaranteed a full season of pay. Currently, such players are guaranteed only a half season of pay. If the management council continues to refuse to budge on the issue, the players association likely will opt to end the collective bargaining agreement after the 1999 season and make 2000 an uncapped year.

The management council allegedly is using a good cop/bad cop approach, with commissioner Paul Tagliabue being the good cop and executive vice president Harold Henderson playing the bad cop.

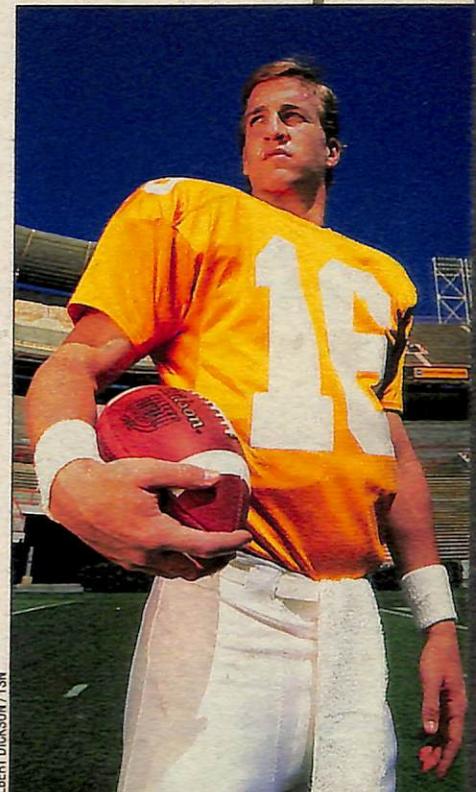
The players association remains livid because two weeks before the Super Bowl—in an apparent reaction to negotiations—the league office refused to sell the NFLPA its usual allotment of Super Bowl tickets. Then, three days before the game, the league offered to sell a portion of the tickets, but the union refused. By that time, the NFLPA had purchased tickets through scalpers and other sources, paying as much as \$3,000 per ticket.

inside dish

FRONT OFFICE RUMBLINGS AND LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS FROM DAN POMPEI

The Rob Johnson trade could be the first of several this offseason. Other players who are available for trades include Jets defensive end Hugh Douglas (he doesn't fit the team's three-man front); Jets wide receiver Jeff Graham (they're overloaded at the position); Falcons running back Jamal Anderson (Atlanta wants to give Byron Hanspard a chance); Falcons free safety Devin Bush (the club wants more consistency at the position); Panthers quarterback Kerry Collins (Carolina offered him, along with running back Tim Biakabutuka, other players and draft picks to the Colts for the first pick in the draft, but Indianapolis wasn't interested); Chargers defensive tackle Shawn Lee (San Diego is considering a makeover of its defensive line); Redskins defensive tackle Sean Gilbert (he's a free agent with a franchise tag, but Washington would be happy to unload him for a first-round pick); Bears defensive end Alonso Spellman (the club would take a second-round pick for him); and Bucs running back Errict Rhett (there's no room in a crowded backfield; he could bring a third- or fourth-round pick). ... Peyton Manning turned the tables on teams interviewing him at the combine. He walked into one interview with three pages of questions to ask the interviewers. Executives walked away very impressed with Manning's maturity, intelligence and composure, and he likely cemented his place as the first pick in the draft. ... Not everyone thinks Rod Woodson is washed up. Ravens coaches believe he's the best cornerback on the market, and they'll make a hard run at him. ...

Eric Swann's re-signing with the Cardinals for five years and \$25 million had a big impact on Dana Stubblefield and the 49ers. Once Swann's price was established, Stubblefield's price went up and out of the 49ers' range. The Cardinals signed Swann before the start of free agency in part because they feared the Jaguars would try to sign him even though the Cardinals planned on tagging Swann as a franchise player. The Jaguars have the two first-round picks to give up—the price for a franchise player—because they received an extra first-rounder when they traded Johnson.



ALBERT DICKSON/TSN

DOCKET POISE: Manning was Mr. Mature during combine interviews, likely ensuring his No. 1 spot.

Bengals



BIG DADDY DENIED: While **Darnay Scott** celebrates a five-year, \$15-million contract, defensive end **Dan Wilkinson** grumbles about the franchise-player designation that has been put on him. The Bengals are only required to pay Wilkinson \$3 million in 1998, while Scott gets a \$3.5 million signing bonus and salaries ranging from \$1.3 million in '98 to \$2.55 million in 2002. The team's message to Wilkinson is clear: If you're going to test the free-agent market, then we'll play our trump card and keep you around for at least another year. And if your production increases from the 34-tackle, five-sack effort in '97, then we'll reward you with a handsome long-term deal. ... Look for '97 first-round pick **Reinard Wilson** to have an increased role in '98. After struggling as a rookie making the transition from right end to linebacker, he is all but penciled in as the starter at right outside linebacker. Wilson will replace unrestricted free agent **Gerald Dixon**, who will take his team-high eight sacks to another team.

DRAFT TALK: Offensive tackles **Tra Thomas** (Florida State), **Flozell Adams** (Michigan State) and **Kyle Turley** (San Diego State) are possibilities for the team with 13th overall pick. If not, a linebacker is in order; the team loves **Keith Brooking** (Georgia Tech), **Anthony Simmons** (Clemson) and **Kiwiuama Mays** (North Carolina). —*Chick Ludwig*

Broncos



YOUNG IDEAS: The Broncos are accomplishing *mission impossible* during this era of free agency: They're signing their best young players to long-term contracts. Tight end **Dwayne Carswell** is the latest player (four years),

\$2.3 million) to re-sign, joining running back **Terrell Davis**, center **Tom Nalen**, kicker **Jason Elam**, wide receiver **Rod Smith**, defensive tackle **Maa Tanuvasa** and defensive end **Harald Hasselbach** on the list of young veterans who have re-upped. The signings serve two purposes: They help the front office save money while managing the salary cap, and they create continuity in the locker room. Carswell is a punishing blocker who thrives in the two-tight end formations the Broncos use extensively, and he's valuable in handling the zone blitzes that have become so prevalent.

TARGET: The Vikings have designated **John Randle** as a transition player, meaning he must be paid at least \$2.4 million. That's the same cap slot the Broncos have available after releasing **Michael Dean Perry**. Even though the Vikings could match any offer, look for the Broncos to make a run at Randle early in the free-agency period. ... The team re-signed cornerback **Ray Crockett**, who is coming off one of his best seasons. Crockett's man-to-man coverage skills are crucial to coordinator **Greg Robinson**'s scheme. —*Jim Armstrong*

Chiefs



NICE SAVE: The team avoided a bidding war when it beat the clock and re-signed cornerback **James Hasty** to a four-year deal on the final day before the free-agency period opened. Hasty had let it be known he wanted to remain with

the Chiefs and the team reciprocated by making him a priority. Now Hasty, who is entering his 11th season, can play out his career in Kansas City as the corner bookend to **Dale Carter**. The man-to-man ability of that duo allows the Chiefs to be creative with their blitzing. ... The team designated defensive lineman **Dan Williams** as its franchise player, virtually ensuring his return for the 1998 season. With the extra cap space created by the new television contract, the Chiefs have set free agency, the draft and potential 1999 free agents (Carter, **Andre Rison**, **Donnie Edwards**, **Anthony Davis**) as first, second and third priorities.

RUNNING IN PLACE: The search for **Jimmy Raye**'s replacement as running backs coach is proceeding amid meetings with prospective free agents. ... The coaching staff now includes three members of the Schottenheimer clan. **Brian Schottenheimer**, Marty's son and defensive backs coach Kurt's nephew, has joined the staff as an assistant. Brian was a quarterback on the 1996 championship team at Florida and worked on **Dick Vermeil**'s St. Louis staff in '97. —*Luciana Chavez*

Bills



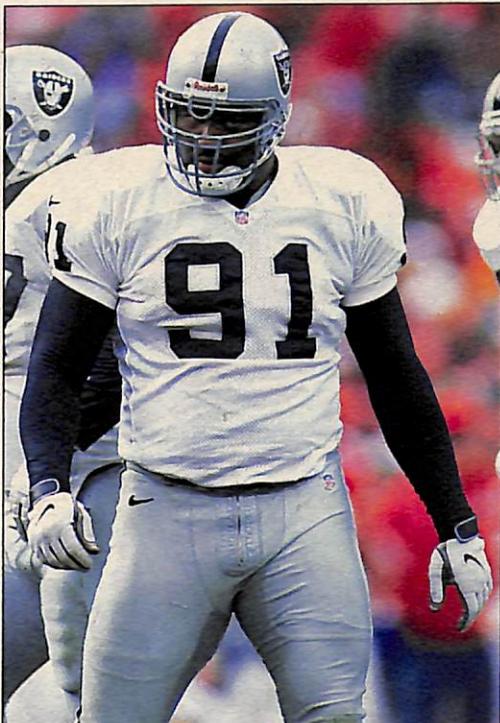
NEW NO. 1: The trade for the Jaguars' **Rob Johnson** cost the Bills the No 9 overall pick in the 1998 draft and a fourth-round selection, but the team believes it has landed a quarterback who will start for many years. Johnson, who always has been a student of the game, has size (6-4, 215) and decent maneuverability in the pocket. He will be utilized as a dropback passer, but he also will be used in a roaming pocket—a tactic coach **Wade Phillips**

wants to incorporate into the offense. Johnson has one year remaining on a contract that will pay him \$400,000 in '98. If he has success, the club will try to sign him to a long-term deal during the season before he becomes a free agent. If he flops, the team will cut its ties and begin the quarterback-shopping process all over again in '99.

ANGRY MAN: The team has infuriated star nose tackle **Ted Washington** by designating him as its franchise player. Washington, who is seeking a four-year contract worth at least \$20 million, is threatening to sit out part of the season. As a franchise player, he would make around \$2.8 million this season. There is no doubt the team will negotiate with Washington during the spring and summer to sweeten the deal. The team waited until the day of the '97 season opener to give **Bruce Smith** an extension that made him the highest-paid player in team history. —*Sal Maiorana*

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FRANCHISE SALE: McGlockton is on the market.

Chargers



IN BOBBY HE TRUSTS? Coach **Kevin Gilbride** has his fingers crossed that G.M. **Bobby Beathard** will choose wisely during the free-agency period. If not, the price could be high—Gilbride's job. After

struggling through an injury-riddled 4-12 first season as an NFL head coach, it's obvious a similar performance won't be tolerated—**injuries or not**. There's no mystery what Gilbride considers the team's biggest free-agent need: a veteran quarterback. The team will look at the Bears' **Erik Kramer** and the Colts' **Jim Harbaugh**. Count Gilbride among those not looking for **Stan Humphries** to return; he's still undecided about next season.

MOVING ON UP: The team might need to improve its draft standing by one spot if it wants **Peyton Manning** or **Ryan Leaf**. That could cost its first- and second-round picks, and possibly more, considering the Cardinals are conducting an auction for their No. 2 position. If the team swings such a deal, it probably wouldn't pick again until the fifth round—the third- and fourth-round picks were peddled last year. ... The team continues to negotiate with its free agents. Safeties **Michael Dumas** and **Greg Jackson** are expected back; guard **Joe Cocozzo** and tight end **Frank Hartley** will return if the price is right. Running back **Gary Brown** probably will test the market and might not return. —*Jay Paris*

Colts



UNDONE DEAL: The prospect of the team retaining the first overall draft pick and using it on either **Peyton Manning** or **Ryan Leaf** has increased greatly. During the combine, speculation grew regarding a trade with the Panthers for quarterback

Kerry Collins and others. Shortly thereafter, however, both sides closed the door on a deal. Club president **Bill Polian** says Carolina couldn't offer what it would take to pry the No. 1 pick. If that's true, it's doubtful any team will be able to approach his asking price. The main ingredient of any trade is a young quarterback who possesses franchise qualities. The Oilers have a potential star in **Steve McNair**, but the idea of building their future in Nashville around in-state icon Manning might be intriguing.

SO LONG, SEAN: **Sean Dawkins**' five-year stay at Indianapolis probably is over. Efforts to re-sign the experienced receiver prior to the start of the league's free-agent signing period were unsuccessful. The team offered a four-year, \$8 million contract and might have increased the total to \$10 million, but Dawkins was seeking a deal averaging \$3 million. Replacing Dawkins becomes a priority. **Marvin Harrison** is one of the league's rising stars, but the only other experienced receiver on the roster is **Aaron Bailey**, who had 26 receptions for 329 yards last year. —*Mike Chappell*

Dolphins



STAFF REVAMPED: After more than a month of waiting, the team made a series of changes to its coaching staff. **Kippy Brown** was promoted from running backs coach to offensive coordinator to replace the fired **Gary Stevens**. Receivers coach

Larry Seiple moved to quarterbacks coach, defensive staff assistant **Joel Collier** was moved to running backs, **Robert Ford** was hired from Dallas to take over the receivers and **Randy Shannon** was hired from the University of Miami to take the defensive staff assistant's job. Ford may be the most crucial hire because he was brought in to install the Dallas offense that coach **Jimmy Johnson** used in 1992 and '93 to propel the Cowboys to consecutive Super Bowl titles. Johnson said the goal for the Dolphins is to run more than they pass. The Dolphins ran 42.6 percent of the time last season and haven't run more than they've passed since **Dan Marino**'s rookie season.

THE FRANCHISE PLAYER: The team designated defensive tackle **Tim Bowens** as its franchise player after being unable to work out a new deal before the beginning of free agency. Bowens can receive an offer from another team, but the Dolphins would still have the right of first refusal or they would get two first-round picks for him. Look for the team to give Bowens at least \$4 million per year. —*Jason Cole*

Jaguars



MOVING ON UP? The team traded backup quarterback **Rob Johnson** to the Bills for two draft picks—the ninth overall and a fourth-round choice. The team wanted to trade Johnson before he became an unrestricted free agent after the 1998 season. The club next will try to package that ninth pick and the 25th selection, its own, in an attempt to trade up to the top of the first round and draft Michigan cornerback **Charles Woodson** or Florida

State defensive end **Andre Wadsworth**. Who the front office pursues if it does move up will be dictated by what happens in the free-agent market. The team wants to sign two premier defensive players, with defensive line and cornerback as the targeted positions. ... The team strongly considered placing a transition tag on running back **Natrone Means** but opted not to do so. Therefore, Means became a free agent and almost certainly will not be back. If Means does not return, the club likely will select a back in the early rounds.

BLOCKING BACK: Fullback **Ty Hallock** is a free agent who has yet to receive an offer from the club. The team wants to upgrade the fullback position, since Hallock is a better receiver than blocker. One possibility is **Sam Gash**, who played for coordinator **Chris Palmer** when he was quarterbacks coach for the Patriots. —Pete Prisco

Oilers



STAYING PUT: As expected, linebacker **Barron Wortham** agreed to terms with the team on a four-year deal to stay put before the free-agency period opened. Losing him would have meant the team would have had to consider

moving outside linebacker **Joe Bowden** to the inside—which would have taken his speed off the perimeter—or giving second-year linebacker **Dennis Stallings** a shot. Wortham, who will be entering his fifth season, is the first of the team's unrestricted free agents to agree to a deal. Defensive tackle **Henry Ford** and guard **Kevin Donnalley** officially hit the open market last Friday, with Donnalley set to attract the most interest. Miami and Jacksonville will be among the chief suitors.

TOUGHER AND TOUGHER: With Detroit's **Johnnie Morton**, the Bengals' **Darnay Scott** and the Packers' **Robert Brooks** already off the market—and the Falcons' **Bert Emanuel** designated a transition player—the team likely will vigorously recruit **Yancey Thigpen**. But it will take \$4 million a year to get Thigpen, which might turn off the club. If Thigpen were to sign elsewhere, Emanuel would still be a possibility. The team would have to make an offer that the Falcons would be unlikely to match. However, G.M. **Floyd Reese** usually is prudent with draft picks, which the team would have to give to Atlanta as compensation. —Jeff Legwold

Ravens



A GAME OF TAG: The decision to put a franchise tag on center **Wally Williams** might seem like a bad move, but it might be a good one if the team is intent on keeping its promise of being a playoff contender in 1998. The team now

has to pay Williams \$3 million in salary next season, but the loss of Williams might have been devastating to a team that lost another starting center (**Steve Everitt**) a year ago in free agency. Williams is the team's most athletic offensive lineman and also can play guard. The Ravens have one of the biggest lines in the league, and it has the potential to be dominating. As one of the team's strengths, the line had to be kept together if the team expects to make any kind of a playoff run. The Jaguars and Jets had serious interest in Williams.

HIGHER STAKES: The team may have to pay more money than expected if it wants to sign free-agent wide receiver **Derrick Alexander**. He was rated in the second tier of free-agent receivers, but now that **Johnnie Morton**, **Darnay Scott** and **Robert Brooks** have re-signed with their teams, Alexander has more leverage in the bargaining game. ... The team is looking for a fullback and Miami's **Roosevelt Potts** looks like a promising possibility not only because he played for Ravens coach **Ted Marchibroda** in Indianapolis, but Potts' agent is Marchibroda's son, **Ted Marchibroda Jr.** —Mike Preston

Jets



O'DONNELL'S DONE? Embattled quarterback **Neil O'Donnell** has been asked to take a hefty pay cut on his base salary of \$4.25 million, but don't assume it means he'll return. For one thing, O'Donnell, whose relationship with coach **Bill Parcells** eroded late in the season, is likely to reject any pay reduction. Secondly, Parcells, while telling O'Donnell's agent he wants him back, still is weighing other options. Ultimately, Parcells probably will try to

deal O'Donnell. One interested team could be the Panthers, who might be ready to unload **Kerry Collins**. Panthers coach **Dom Capers** knows O'Donnell from their days together in Pittsburgh. Ideally, the front office would like to get a second-round pick for O'Donnell, recouping the 1998 second-rounder it sent to the Patriots after hiring Parcells, but that's a dream. A middle-round selection is more likely. Meanwhile, the club has approached quarterback **Glenn Foley** about a contract extension.

LOOKING FOR SAFETY: The front office has its eye on UCLA safety **Shaun Williams** as a possible first-round pick. The club opened last season with **Marcus Coleman** at free safety, but he bombed and gave way to **Jerome Henderson**, a stop-gap player. In **Bill Belichick's** defensive scheme, it's imperative to have a fast free safety who is smart enough to run the secondary. —Rich Cimini

Patriots



HOUSEKEEPING: On the day before the free-agency period opened, the Patriots spent \$41 million—\$12 million of it in signing bonuses—to keep defensive end **Willie McGinest** (five years, \$25 million) and offensive tackle **Bruce Armstrong**

(four years, \$16 million). Keeping McGinest and Armstrong were priorities, and team officials were ecstatic they succeeded without using a franchise player designation. New England is one of the few teams that has never used its franchise tag. ... The priority now shifts to running back **Curtis Martin**, who turned down a six-year, \$20 million offer at the end of the season. But Martin is a restricted free agent, meaning the Patriots can match any offer he gets.

OUT IN THE COLD: Right guard **Todd Rucci** entered free agency without an offer, as did fullbacks **Sam Gash** and **Keith Byars**. The team drafted three linemen last year—**Damon Denson**, **Ed Ellis** and **Scott Rehberg**—and coach **Pete Carroll** wants to give them a chance. Rucci was the least effective of the linemen last season, and if he doesn't re-sign, Carroll can shuffle players and maybe even improve the run blocking. Personnel director **Bobby Grier**, a big Gash fan, is trying to convince Carroll that Gash's 1997 problems were caused by his injury situation and his public complaints about the coaching were caused by frustration. —Kevin Mannix

Seahawks



INVESTING IN COACHES: After dawdling for five weeks in its unsuccessful search for a new general manager, management stepped up big time when it came to filling out the coaching staff. Owner **Paul Allen** paid top dollar in

acquiring special teams coach **Pete Rodriguez** from Washington and wide receivers coach **Milt Jackson** from the Giants. Each will receive more than \$200,000 per year. The team also has added former Colts defensive coordinator **Jim Johnson** as linebackers coach and former Oakland assistant **Bill Meyers** will handle the offensive line. Of the four newcomers, Rodriguez should have the biggest impact. As one of the league's top special teams coaches, he inherits a unit that ranked among the league's worst in 1997. His opinion will weigh heavily on coach **Dennis Erickson**'s decision whether to keep kicker **Todd Peterson** and punter **Rick Tuten**. Both are unsigned.

GOOD CATCHES: The club was pretty well settled at the wide receiver position before the free-agency period opened. **James McKnight** was re-signed to a three-year, \$3.6 million contract and **Ronnie Harris** was given a two-year deal. McKnight is the team's third receiver but many believe he has the potential to be a talented second. He probably would have been a hot item on the open market. —John Clayton

Raiders



McGLOCKTON MATTERS: The team designated Pro Bowl defensive tackle **Chester McGlockton** as its franchise player. But it does not mean he will return next season. Look for the team to seek trade offers, hoping to collect at least a

first-round draft choice. ... Offensive tackle **Pat Harlow** and fullback **Derrick Fenner** are thus the team's most prominent free agents. Harlow would benefit from moving to right tackle, but the team doesn't have the cap room to pursue a top-flight left tackle. That means Harlow may come back to play there again. But Fenner says he doesn't plan to return, so the team should seek a blocking fullback in the free-agent market.

TURN UP THE HEAT: New defensive coordinator **Willie Shaw** vows to field an attacking defense. Shaw inherits a daunting assignment—the team ranked last in the NFL in total defense in '97. The Raiders need to pry more production out of their underachieving line (31 sacks, tied for third lowest in the NFL in '97); find a linebacker who can run and make big plays; and upgrade the secondary. **Albert Lewis** is the only defensive back coming off a solid season—and Shaw's blitzing style demands reliable coverage from the secondary. The team may address this shortcoming by targeting Heisman Trophy winner **Charles Woodson** with the fourth overall pick in the draft. —Ron Kroichick

Steelers



REPLACING CHAN: Losing offensive coordinator **Chan Gailey** to the Cowboys will probably force **Bill Cowher** to go outside the organization for a replacement. A couple of early candidates are Vikings quarterbacks coach **Ray Sherman** and former Colts head coach **Lindy Infante**.

Cowher has received permission to talk to Sherman. Infante is considered an offensive whiz whose specialty is the passing game—same as Gailey's. About the only real in-house candidate is tight ends coach **Mike Mularkey**, who worked closely with Gailey in the signaling of plays to the field.

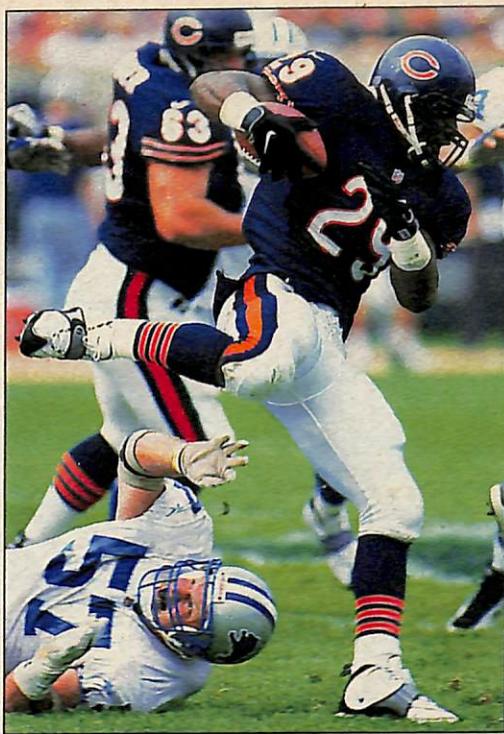
CHASING THIGPEN: One of the residual problems of Gailey leaving is that he might pursue **Yancey Thigpen**. Dallas has been searching for a receiver to take pressure off **Michael Irvin**, and **Anthony Miller** wasn't the answer. Thigpen is also expected to be pursued by the Oilers and Ravens. ... The club has made offers to their seven unrestricted free agents—Thigpen, nose tackle **Joel Steed**, offensive tackle **John Jackson**, linebacker **Jason Gildon**, guard **Tom Myslinski**, safety **Myron Bell** and corner **Randy Fuller**. However, all have indicated they want to test the market. ... Director of football operations **Tom Donahoe** says the team has not made a decision on the future of linebacker **Greg Lloyd**, who hasn't played a full season since 1995. —Gerry Dulac

Bears



MOVING AHEAD: Free-agent running back **Raymont Harris** is slightly ahead of schedule with his rehab of the broken fibula he suffered late in the season. He is off crutches and expected to be running late next month, a few weeks sooner than expected. The team thought enough of his progress to place a transition tag on him but will still pursue other free-agent backs. Harris, meanwhile, will look for long-term offers. His injury history has the team leery of a major commitment, and if he comes back at a modest salary, there is some concern about his attitude. Harris is not a locker-room cancer but resents that in his four years he never has been considered the permanent solution at tailback. ... The team's scouts left the Indianapolis scouting combine impressed with the draft depth at running back and are particularly high on Penn State's **Curtis Enis**.

NOT DONE: The re-signing of tackle **Jim Flanigan** doesn't signal the end of the defensive line moves. The club plans on looking at tackles **Joel Steed** (Steelers) and **Mike Wells** (Lions) and is expected to target end **Neil Smith**. ... Tight end **Ryan Wetnight** was turned off by the team's early offer and is shopping. The club can't afford to lose him. He isn't a top-shelf starter but is an effective underneath receiver. Last year, second-round pick **John Allred** couldn't beat him out. —John Mullin



GETTING CLOSE: Harris' rehab is ahead of schedule.

Buccaneers



END AROUND: The signing of defensive end **Israel Ifeanyi** could bring an end to the sad saga of **Eric Curry**. Curry, an unrestricted free agent and former first-round pick, has little chance of being re-signed. He made just one tackle in 1997

and had fallen to the bottom of the depth chart. Ifeanyi, 27, is a project, but the front office has high hopes for him. He was a second-round 1996 pick of the 49ers and played three games that season, but injuries and slow development prompted San Francisco to release him. Bucs defensive line coach **Rod Marinelli**, who coached the defensive line at Southern California when Ifeanyi played there, was the driving force behind the signing.

FULLBACK HELP: It was not a glaring weakness, but one of the team's first offseason moves was to sign fullback **Kantroy Barber**, who spent part of last season with the Panthers. That should remedy a situation that became dangerous down the stretch last season when starter **Mike Alstott** was banged up. Without a true backup fullback, the team used reserve tight end **Patrick Hape** in that role. That made the offense predictable and allowed defenses to concentrate on tailback **Warrick Dunn**. Barber's arrival also should allow Hape to concentrate on tight end, where he showed promise in his rookie season. —Pat Yasinskas

NFC

Cardinals



PREEMPTIVE STRIKE: With **Eric Swann's** signing, the club quickly has helped establish market value for an outstanding crop of free-agent defensive tackles, including **John Randle** and **Dana Stubblefield**. The club feared that if it waited, those two could receive higher salaries that might drive Swann's price even higher. ... With Swann in the fold, along with 1996 NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year **Simeon Rice** and tackle **Mark Smith**, who had an impressive rookie season in '97, the club has three-fourths of a potentially dominating line. At the fourth spot, end **Michael Bankston** is a free agent, but he could become expendable. With the club holding the No. 2 pick in the draft, it is positioned to select Florida State defensive end **Andre Wadsworth**. Until the cap went up \$10 million, it appeared unlikely the club could afford Swann and Wadsworth. Now, that has changed. Although a front of Wadsworth, Swann, Smith and Rice would be expensive, it also could be awesome against the run and in rushing the passer.

PIVOTAL PLAYERS: Two other key free-agents for the club to re-sign are cornerback **J.J. McCleskey**, arguably its second-best cover man at the end of the season, and third receiver **Kevin Williams**, who was among the league's best dual-purpose return specialists. Their departures would leave big holes. —Lee Shappell

Eagles



FREE TO GO: The team relinquished its right of first refusal on the contracts of free-agent linebacker **Darrin Smith** and quarterback **Ty Detmer**, making both unrestricted free agents. Smith was injured most of last season and was a major

disappointment. Detmer knew he was gone as soon as **Rodney Peete** was re-signed to be **Bobby Hoyer's** backup. Green Bay, San Francisco, Oakland and Carolina all could be interested in Detmer as a reserve. ... In something of a surprise move, free-agent defensive tackle **Rhett Hall** was designated a transition player, giving the team a chance to match any offer he might receive. Hall, who led the team with eight sacks last season, suffered a major knee injury in the second-to-last game of the season and is expected to be out of action until June.

HE'S THE JUAN: Tight ends coach **Juan Castillo** was promoted to the crucial position of offensive line coach. Castillo replaces **Bill Callahan**, who joined the Raiders to become offensive coordinator. The offensive line allowed the second-most sacks in the league last season and the third-most in team history. Improvement falls on the inexperienced shoulders of Castillo, who must get the most from an underachieving group. **Jim Bollman**, offensive line coach at Michigan State, takes Castillo's job as tight ends coach. —Mark Eckel

Falcons



STAYING PUT: The club said its first priority in free agency would be to keep its top players, and it locked up two of them with the re-signing of kicker **Morten Andersen** and punter **Dan Stryzinski**. Andersen received a three-year, \$2.7 million deal, and Stryzinski got almost \$2 million over three years. Andersen still has one of the strongest legs in the game after 16 years. He comes off a solid season in which he made 23-of-27 field-goal attempts and all of his PATs. Stryzinski isn't often mentioned with the NFL's top punters, but he was a valuable player for the franchise in '97. His high and well-placed punts helped the team lead the league in punt coverage, allowing 2.6 yards per return.

TOUGH DECISIONS: Five veterans were waived by the team. Center **Roman Fortin** and tackle **Antone Davis** were front-line players at the beginning of the '97 season, and defensive end **Anthony Pleasant** and receiver **Michael Haynes** were considered potential starters during training camp. The other player released was former practice squad offensive lineman **Jeremy Akers**. Fortin lost his job to rookie **Calvin Collins**, and Davis was benched in favor of **Matt Willig**. Pleasant missed the first five games with a knee injury and had a limited role when he returned. Haynes was unproductive and is expected to retire. —Tony Fabrizio

49ers



DEFENSIVE TURNOVER: The defense will have a different look next season, made clear by the waiving of linebacker **Kevin Greene** and cornerback **Rod Woodson** and a near-farewell to tackle **Dana Stubblefield**. With greater needs at

offensive tackle, cornerback and linebacker, the team is prepared to let Stubblefield go. Team vice president **Dwight Clark** says the team will try to re-sign Greene and Woodson, but it is believed Greene wants to go to a team where he can start, and the 49ers are expected to replace Woodson with a younger cornerback via free agency or the draft. Woodson has not ruled out returning at a lower price and trying to regain his starting job.

MURKY MIDDLE: The team will be looking for a middle linebacker after not picking up the option on fourth-year player **Kevin Mitchell**. Mitchell had been slated to start last season, but a poor exhibition performance by the entire run defense resulted in Mitchell taking the fall and **Gary Plummer** being re-inserted into the starting lineup. Plummer will be 38 this year, and his general health might preclude another entire season of starting, although Plummer does stay in excellent shape. Plummer has said he'd like to return, and the team hasn't ruled out re-signing Mitchell. Still, look for pursuit of a linebacker in free agency. —Brian Murphy

Giants



PIERCE RELEASED: The team had a tight fit getting under the new tentative salary cap but made it partly by releasing tight end **Aaron Pierce**. Former coach **Dan Reeves** was accused of underutilizing Pierce, and many thought he

would flourish in **Jim Fassel's** system. The team even reworked his contract and cut the pay of **Howard Cross**. In the end, though, Pierce failed to unseat Cross as the starter. For now, the tight end duo is Cross and **Alfred Pupunu**, but finding help at that position is a top priority in free agency or the draft. ... Another priority was satisfied with the re-signing of free safety **Tito Wooten**, the quarterback of the secondary and valued for his on-field leadership. He was the team's only 1997 starter who was an unrestricted free agent.

NO END IN SIGHT: The agent for center **Brian Williams** says there has been no progress with the injured right eye that caused Williams to miss the '97 season, but he has not officially retired. Williams has experienced double vision since being inadvertently poked in the eye in training camp. At some point, though, a decision must be made because of the significant financial impact Williams has on the team. Luckily, the team got a better-than-expected season out of late pickup **Lance Scott**. The team might go after free agent **Kevin Mawae** as a replacement for Williams. —Neil Best

Panthers



DEAD DEAL: Charlotte was abuzz with news that the team was discussing a deal to send quarterback **Kerry Collins** and some combination totaling at least seven players and/or picks to the Colts for the No. 1 overall pick in the draft, which would have been used on Tennessee quarterback **Peyton Manning**. But, ultimately, the Colts' asking price was too steep, and the deal fell through—a deal coach **Dom Capers** claimed was never even

broached at a serious level. Capers insists the plan is to proceed as if Collins will be the team's quarterback next season. But it's obvious the coaches have no confidence in Collins, and it's clear that any offer he might receive from other teams will not be matched.

FREE-AGENT FRENZY: An outside linebacker is needed because Capers confirmed a plan to move **Micheal Barrow** back to the inside next season. Barrow was signed to play inside last season, but he had to move outside to replace **Kevin Greene**. Among the possibilities: Pittsburgh's **Jason Gildon**, Buffalo's **Bryce Paup** and **Ken Harvey** of Washington. ... The team hired five-time Pro Bowl inside linebacker **Sam Mills** as a scout. His greatest immediate value could be assisting in the recruiting of top free agents. —Joe Menzer

Redskins



SMART MOVES: After re-signing key free agents **Ken Harvey** (five years, \$3.7 million a year) and **Tre' Johnson** (four years, \$2.9 million a year), the Redskins can turn their attention to finding an offensive tackle in free agency. They still

might re-sign **Joe Patton**, but indications are they're going to explore other options. Johnson missed five games in '97 with shoulder problems that have been corrected with surgery. With Harvey under contract (and **Greg Jones** playing behind him), **Marcus Patton** and **Derek Smith**, the team is set at linebacker for several years. ... Tight end **Jamie Asher** and end **Rich Owens**, both restricted free agents, won't be going anywhere in '98. The team made qualifying offers of \$864,000 to each. If another team lures either away, the Redskins get a first-round pick as compensation.

WRITE IF YOU FIND WORK: Though the team designated holdout **Sean Gilbert** its franchise player, he has been given permission to talk to other teams. Technically, the team is supposed to receive two first-round choices if Gilbert signs elsewhere. In reality, the team will settle for less to close the issue. The team insists the lines of communication remain open with Gilbert, but that's being kind. The only thing the team wants to hear from Gilbert is that he has a contract, so the front office can begin negotiating compensation for him. —Paul Woody

Lions



JUMP START: The team is able to focus completely on defense in free agency because it took care of its offensive free agents with the resignings of receiver **Johnnie Morton** and left tackle **Ray Roberts** (five years, \$15.45 million) before the free-agency period began. ... The team also is hoping to sign center **Kevin Glover** and tackle **Larry Tharpe**, who are free agents, but the defensive priorities come first.

TAG FREE: The team solved a big problem when it signed Roberts to a contract two minutes before it would have had to designate him as a franchise player. The club wants the franchise tag available in the next couple of years when other key players, including defensive linemen **Robert Porcher** and **Luther Elliss**, become unrestricted. ... The team is in desperate need of linebackers, but coach **Bobby Ross** says the team doesn't plan to shift defensive end **Tracy Scroggins** back to his original position of linebacker. Scroggins is a good pass rusher, but he isn't as productive in stopping the run or dropping back into coverage, the skills the team is looking for in its 4-3 outside backers. ... Though it was assumed the fate of **Glyn Milburn** would be sealed with the drafting of a speedy receiver with return abilities, that might not be the case. Ross doesn't want to leave the team too short in those areas and might continue to carry Milburn. —Paula Pasche

Packers



ATTACK MODE: Expecting heavy interest in its players, the team made preemptive strikes before the start of free agency, signing wide receiver **Robert Brooks** for five years and \$15.1 million and outside linebacker **Brian Williams**

for four years and \$11.5 million. The Packers also were close to completing a deal with receiver **Antonio Freeman**. By locking up Brooks and Freeman and putting a franchise tag on running back **Dorsey Levens**, the team will retain most of its key offensive weapons; guard **Aaron Taylor** is the only possible loss. Defensively, however, they are likely to lose cornerback **Doug Evans** and end **Gabe Wilkins**.

ELEPHANT DEFENSE? If the Packers sign Bills free-agent linebacker **Bryce Paup**, they will have to restructure the defense, perhaps going back to the "Elephant" scheme used by **Ray Rhodes** when he was coordinator and Paup was a combination linebacker-end. ... The team did not make a first-round contract offer to restricted free-agent running back **Travis Jersey**, meaning he can be had for a fifth-round draft choice. ... Levens is clearly not happy with the franchise tag. The franchise number for running backs is \$2.742 million, well below what Levens would have gotten on the market. He could be a camp holdout. Levens wants a long-term deal worth about \$4 million a year. —Tom Silverstein

Rams



HE'S THE FRANCHISE: With not much to choose from in free agency and little chance to land Heisman Trophy winner **Charles Woodson** in the draft, the team's decision to place a franchise designation on cornerback **Ryan McNeil** was a prudent one. The 11th-hour re-signings of **James Hasty** in Kansas City and **Ray Crockett** in Denver left only **Doug Evans** and **Antonio Langham** among the free-agent headliners at corner. The Rams know

McNeil is good, but some in the organization aren't quite sure how good. McNeil gets beat deep on occasion and was one of the most penalized players on the team. But he plays aggressively and makes plays, as witnessed by his league-high nine interceptions. He also was better against the run than advertised. The franchise tag gives the team another year to evaluate McNeil while working on a long-term deal.

O'NEAL'S FATE: All signs point to the release of defensive end **Leslie O'Neal**. He's due a \$1 million roster bonus March 1, so the decision has to be made soon. O'Neal, who will be 34 in May, could have played better against the run last season. But he posted a team-high 10 sacks for a team that finished 24th in the NFL in that category. O'Neal was slowed by a chronic foot problem as the season progressed, and surgery is a possibility. —Jim Thomas

Saints



CHANGE OF HEART: Offensive line, wide receiver and "the right defensive player in the right area" are coach **Mike Ditka**'s new targets during the free-agency period. Ditka subtracted running back from his shopping list after

watching videotape of **Ray Zellars** and realizing most of the top free-agent backs—**Dorsey Levens**, **Robert Smith**, **Raymont Harris**—probably will be re-signed by their teams or get franchise and transition designations. ... The Saints also decided not to re-sign three more of their unrestricted free agents: safety **Anthony Newman**, linebacker **Ernest Dixon** and quarterback **Doug Nussmeier**. The decision not to re-sign running back **Mario Bates** was made earlier.

SAY IT AINT SO: Defensive end **Joe Johnson** was designated as a franchise player, guaranteeing a 1998 tender of \$3 million. But it also takes him off the unrestricted market, ruining his chance for the \$4 million-plus salary he could command. ... The final year of receiver **Andre Hastings**' contract was terminated, giving him unrestricted free-agent status for the second straight year. The team still hopes to re-sign Hastings, who caught 45 passes for 688 yards and five TDs last season. ... Cornerback **William Strong** was granted reinstatement by the NFL after retiring in 1997. Strong was the team's fifth-round pick in 1995. —Mike Strom

Vikings



SIGNING HIGHLIGHTS: With the re-signing of Pro Bowl left offensive tackle **Todd Steussie** and the franchising of running back **Robert Smith**, the team eased its free-agent agenda considerably on the eve of the signing period. But transition-

player **John Randle** is expected to inspire a bid in the range of \$30 million for five years, including \$10 million to sign, which the team will be forced to match. And Smith is making noise about perhaps challenging the team's franchise designation, claiming it should still apply to guard **Randall McDaniel** as it did a year ago. All of which still takes a backseat to the team's ongoing ownership question, which was scheduled to be settled at a hearing before NFL commissioner **Paul Tagliabue** Thursday in New York.

CORNER STORE: Green Bay cornerback **Doug Evans** will visit the Vikings this week. The team has tabbed Evans as its top free-agent priority. Other free-agent cornerbacks who are high on the team's list are Buffalo's **Jeff Burris** and Baltimore's **Antonio Langham**. ... The team will target 49ers kicker **Gary Anderson** in free agency. But **Chip Lohmiller** and **Mike Vanderjagt**, a CFL standout with Toronto, will receive tryouts. The team also is expected to sign punter **Andy Caflisch**, a former Wisconsin-Stout player who has been with four NFL teams. —Don Banks



Tom Dienhart and Mike Huguenin

With these guys moving in, their teams could move up

It's easy to skip over their names on your school's list of recruits. We haven't learned much about them over the past few months, when recruiting talk focused on blue-chip high school products.

Players from junior colleges are the forgotten sons of college football, the guys who may have been too slow, too weak, academically deficient or just plain overlooked coming out of high school. Whatever the case, their impact can't be ignored. O.J. Simpson, Mike Rozier and Cortez Kennedy were three of the best JC transfers. The following may not reach the status of the aforementioned trio, but they figure to fill important roles this fall:

Kenric Lott, OT, Alabama. If Lott doesn't come through, it's likely the Tide's line will be mediocre again. Lott, from Jones County CC in Ellisville, Miss., is one of six JC transfers signed by the Tide, and he's expected to step in as the starter at left tackle. Lott was heavily recruited out of high school in Blackshear, Ga., by Florida State; the recruiting coordinator at FSU at that time was Ronnie Cottrell, who now holds the same job at Alabama.

Frank Murphy, RB, Kansas State. He's big (6-1, 205), he's fast (4.4) and he's considered the top JC prize. Murphy should start at tailback for a Wildcats team that should be the best in Bill Snyder's tenure. Murphy, who will fill the void created by the departures of Mike Lawrence and Eric Hickson, was named 1997 junior college player of the year by the NJCAA after rushing for 1,370 yards and scoring 26 touchdowns for Garden City (Kan.) CC. Originally from Callahan, Fla., Murphy didn't qualify out of high school in 1995 and enrolled at Itawamba CC in Fulton, Miss., where he played receiver. He transferred to Garden City, where he redshirted in 1996 before starring last season. Murphy's resume has been sullied by some run-ins with the law, but he appears to have a bright future.

Bryan Paul, QB, Washington State. Five high school quarterbacks from the state signed Division I-A letters-of-intent, but none chose the Cougars. You'd think up-and-coming quarterbacks would be begging to follow in the footsteps of Timm Rosenbach/Drew Bledsoe/Ryan Leaf. As it stands, the 6-4, 200-pound Paul, a product of West Los Angeles College, figures to be the man for the Cougars this season. He'll compete with junior Steve Birnbaum for Leaf's starting spot, but Birnbaum is recovering from knee surgery and is



HEADING UPFIELD: The top JC prize, Murphy is one reason K-State should be better than ever.

unlikely to be ready for action until the fall. Paul is a scrambler, and his mobility may be needed while working behind a line that will have four new starters.

Mark Word, DE, Southern Miss. He generally is considered one of the nation's top two or three JC defensive linemen. He's penciled in to start opposite Adalius Thomas, which will give the Golden Eagles a solid pair of ends. Word, from high school powerhouse Miami Southridge and Hinds CC in Raymond, Miss., has one year of eligibility left.

Other JC transfers who should have a chance to make big impacts in '98 are Washington State running back Kevin Brown, Ohio State linebacker James Cotton, Florida State cornerback Reggie Durden, Clemson linebacker Warren Lott and Illinois wide receiver Connie Moore.

The need for Read

It had the makings of one of the best stories of the offseason: After 21 months of retirement, former Montana coach Don Read was about to return to college football as an assistant at Northern Arizona. He was to assist new Lumberjacks coach Jerome Souers, a former Read assistant at Montana.

This was about friendship and the chance for Read, who was living in Castle Rock, Colo., to work again; he became bored following his retirement after the 1995 season. Adding a dash of intrigue, many Grizzlies fans were rankled that their onetime leader, the man who guided Montana to the '95 I-AA title, would work for a rival Big Sky Conference institution.

Alas, it's not going to happen. It didn't take long for Read, 64, to discover the altitude of Flagstaff, Ariz.—at 7,200 feet, the highest venue of any Division I school—severely aggravated his asthma. He spent several weeks trying to figure a way to combat it, but nothing worked. It's too bad because the sport would have been better with an innovative offensive mind such as Read's back on the sideline.

TSN

Associate editor Tom Dienhart and assistant managing editor Mike Huguenin cover college football for THE SPORTING NEWS. E-mail them at colfb@sportingnews.com.

inside dish

CAMPUS RUMBLINGS, LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS
FROM TOM DIENHART AND MIKE HUGUENIN

Texas A&M's offensive coordinator job has become a hot seat of sorts. With **Steve Marshall** having left to take a similar post at North Carolina, A&M will be breaking in its fourth coordinator in six seasons (UCLA coach **Bob Toledo** was dismissed by **R.C. Slocum** after the 1993 season and **Steve Ensminger**—now Clemson's coordinator—was let go after the '96 season). Aggies receivers coach **Steve Kragthorpe**, who was an offensive coordinator at North Texas in 1994 and '95, was promoted to replace Marshall. One thing in A&M's favor: The Aggies brought in the best skill-position talent in the Big 12 in the recent recruiting battles. ... One of the biggest recruiting surprises was defensive end **Jermaine Brooks**' signing with Arkansas. Brooks, a high school All-American from the Los Angeles area, was thought to be headed to USC. But defensive coordinator **Keith Burns**—who was recruiting Brooks for the Trojans—lost his job when coach **John Robinson** was fired. Burns was hired at Arkansas and convinced Brooks to head to Fayetteville. ... Every recruiting coordinator knows how to find Carter High in Dallas. The school usually leads the nation in producing college signees. This year was no different: 11 players signed, with eight going to Division I schools. This was somewhat of a down year for Carter, which annually churns out 15 to 25 players. But by the time colleges open fall drills, Carter expects to have 32 players or so from the Class of 1998 in camps. ... Tulsa had three former JC players on its roster last season; eight were signed last week. Obviously, the Golden Hurricane are looking to improve quickly. The school also added an exercise and sports science major, which made it easier for JC transfers to get on campus. ... Houston made a good move in deciding to play all its games at 23,000-seat Robertson Stadium rather than the 60,000-seat Astrodome. It's better to play in a smaller stadium that's three-fourths full than a larger one that's one-fourth full.

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The SportingNews Sports Puzzle

DOWN Answers found on page 61.

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6 Camera abbr.
7 Stock car
8 Bobby in the bullpen
10 Stuff in the bag
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19 Sun
21 Skins center Al 1945-53
22 Music's Mahal
23 Tom punted for Miami
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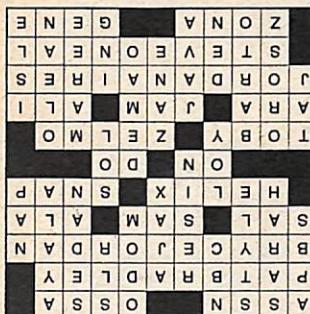
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Dave Kindred

Suits illustrated

In the sports magazine's early years, the editor-in-chief called a staff meeting and said, "It's February. We need to give our readers a break from ice, snow and John Wooden's wooden lips.

Any ideas?"

A junior editor touched his silk cravat and said, "Backgammon in the Bahamas."

A tweedy one said, "Poker on the train from White Plains."

A third said, "Vince Lombardi in a swimsuit."

"Bingo there," the chief said.

You may wonder how I know this. I know it from a source close to Monica Lewinsky. Actually, it's a source close to Monica Lewinsky's stepmother's maid's cousin's babysitter, whose older brother's football coach knows all about Lombardi, including the winter night when the great man climbed into bed and his wife said, "God, your feet are cold." Lombardi said, "Honey, when we're alone, you can call me Vince."

My reliable source also reports that the sports magazine's editors loved the idea of a photo spread showing Lombardi in a swimsuit.

"Should we take him to Tahiti?" the editor-in-chief asked.

"No, no," the art director said, "let's shoot him in his natural habitat. Ice-fishing in downtown Green Bay."

"Or making snow angels at Lambeau Field," someone said.

Lombardi turned down the magazine's invitation. He said, "Who do you ratzenfratzin' think I am, Tarzan of the Arctic?"

Editors give up on their ideas as often as fleas give up on dogs. So in a later winter, the sports magazine's editor-in-chief told subordinates, "February, ratzenfratzin' February. We need to give our readers a break from ice, snow and Bowie Kuhn's bushy eyebrows. Let's make this swimsuit thing fly. We're going with Babe Ruth."

The chief had seen a photograph of Ruth in a striped tank top and long-legged swimming shorts. He said to his assistants, "Who needs Lombardi when you can have Babe Ruth?"

The room fell silent. I know the room fell silent because I have a source close to Kenneth Starr. Actually, the source is close to cable TV repairmen who have worked in buildings once occupied by the independent counsel's fifth-grade piano teacher.

In the fallen-silent room, the magazine's backgammon editor adjusted his silk cravat. Another editor, suddenly itchy, began scratching under his tweed jacket. Finally, the silk cravat said, "Sir, on the Babe Ruth idea, it's a brilliant idea, utterly brilliant, better than backgammon in the Bahamas, better even than roulette in Rio."

The chief smiled and said, "We could take Ruth to Yankee Stadium. Don't they call that 'The House That Ruth Built?' We could spread a picnic blanket in right field for the Babe and his wife. We'd truck in some sand. We could call it 'The Beach That Ruth Built.'"

"Brilliant, sir," the silk cravat said. "Your swimsuit concept is revolutionary, a real departure from what sports

magazines might be expected to do. Anyone can report on sports that people care about. Not many sports magazines think so profoundly about swimsuits as we do."

The chief beamed.

The tweed jacket said, "And having Babe Ruth as our first swimsuit model would be a real coup of photo enhancement. I mean, seeing as how the Babe has been gone now for 25 years."

"Gone?"

"Unfortunately, sir, dead."

The chief said, "How about Mantle?"

A low-level Washington politician who knows a high administration official's secretary's pedicurist has given me a letter written by the sports magazine's editor-in-chief. It's a letter to Gerald Ford. It reads:

"Dear Mr. President,

"It is February and we in the sports magazine business want to give our readers a break from the ice, snow and Dick Butkus' flared nostrils.

"To create this break, we would depart from our run-of-the-mill reporting in which we ask gifted reporters to gain understanding and then explain for our readers the mysteries, fascinations and intrigues of sports.

"Some people have referred to this departure as a 'brilliant' idea and even 'revolutionary.'

"The idea is to introduce a swimsuit issue featuring American sports heroes. Had our magazine existed in Babe Ruth's day, surely we would have asked the Sultan of Swat to put on his tank top for us. These days we have been in touch with Vince Lombardi, Mickey Mantle and many others of similar stature.

"As a former University of Michigan football player, you would fit nicely in such an issue. Thank you for your consideration."

The president's response was not made available by my source.

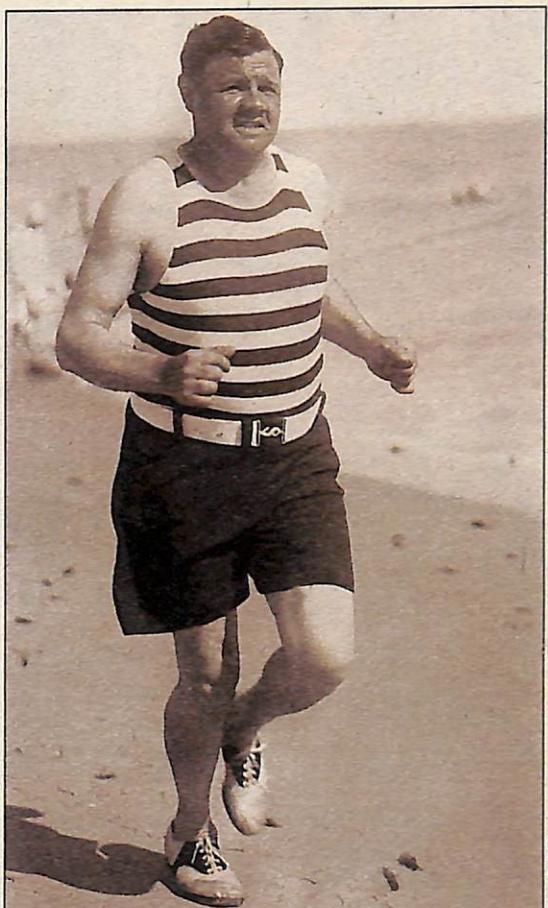
A little birdie whose name is Linda Tripp told me of a late-night telephone conversation with Marv Albert, which she tape-recorded in case she ever needed to prove she could be devious and traitorous. On the tape we hear Marv saying, "As long as I'm confessing, Linda, I might as well tell you about my seventh-grade field trip to the offices of a really big sports magazine."

"That day I told the editor-in-chief, 'I'm tired of reading about DeBusschere, Bradley, Frazier and Willis. Give me babes, impossibly beautiful babes, arranged in lower-mammalian mating positions, wearing water-soluble swimsuits on a beach 5,000 miles from Lambeau Field. Make my February worth living.'

"And the editor said to me, 'Yessss!'"

TSN

Dave Kindred is a contributing writer for THE SPORTING NEWS.



WHAT A BABE! Perhaps an athlete modeling swimwear was an idea ahead of its time.

Editors give up on their ideas as often as fleas give up on dogs.

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